

“Terra Incognita in the Heart of Europe”

Representation of Belarusian National Identity
in Tourism Advertisements

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract Due to historical and political reasons, a lot of Belarusians face a challenge regarding the understanding of their national identity. This thesis aims at analysing the ways tourism advertisements contribute to the nation's representation to Belarusians. The study's objectives concentrate on the formulation of the most recurring cultural representations of Belarusian nation portrayed in the advertisements and evaluation of their contribution to nation-building processes. In the following thesis, I am answering the research questions regarding the markers of cultural representation (e.g., signs, symbols) seen in tourism advertising contributing to Belarusian identity, their cultural connotations, and the differences in the representation of such symbols in governmental and private Belarusian tourist advertisements. Since the thesis is analysing Belarusian national identity features, I also provide a historical and political background of the republic since the thirteenth century. By doing so, the reader gets a comprehensive picture of the events that influenced the problem of national identity and the topicality of this issue nowadays. The data consist of 44 images and snapshots taken from Belarusian online travel resources. As a rule, these images have a direct connection to traditions, myths, and national heritage of the republic. The materials were classified according to their references to geography, leisure practices, cultural heritage, and social relationships. Such references facilitate the classification of the data and allow to identify the national identity markers in a structured way. In this research, I applied the semiology analysis method that analyses denotative and connotative meanings of an image. This method helps to identify "symbols" depicted in the tourist advertisements regarding Belarusian national identity which involves reading between the lines and understanding the historical and cultural "baggage" of the nation in question. This study demonstrated the most representative markers of cultural representation used in the tourist advertisements of Belarus, the way they "speak" to the citizens, and shape Belarusian national identity in the modern context.			
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1 Introduction

The title of the following master's thesis refers to the tourism slogan of the Republic of Belarus, which first appeared at one of the largest tourism exhibitions in the world, the World Travel Market (WTM) in London, 2015. The author of the slogan was Grigory Pomerantsev, ex-acting head of the National Agency for Tourism¹. *Terra incognita* is translated from Latin as "unknown land", which is nowadays a fixed expression, but in the era of Columbus it was used to designate unexplored lands. The purpose of the slogan was to facilitate the entry of Belarus into the European tourist market, and its idea was to appeal to the curiosity of Europeans who, despite having travelled all over Europe, have not visited its "heart" yet. Although the "Terra Incognita in the Heart of Europe" slogan was originally intended to attract international tourists to Belarus, it is also relevant to the local citizens. Even nowadays, living in an independent republic, a lot of Belarusians have difficulties with their national identity. It could be explained with historical reasons and the current politics that are not aimed at the promotion of authentic national Belarusian identity considering it "harmful and nationalist" for the country's well-being and stability. In this thesis I will analyse how tourism advertisements shed light on the nation's representation to an internal audience from Belarus.

At first glance, tourism may seem an odd place to look when researching national identity, but in an era where people and places are carefully marketed at home and abroad, such attention is justified. Although the central motivation is to increase tourist flow, tourism marketing also provides the researchers with data regarding the way the state imagines the nation (Clancy, 2011). At the same time, Urry (1990) states that tourists act as semioticians, who, by looking at signs and sites of national importance, interpret and make meaning out of the visual components regarding the nation, its values and distinctiveness. Hence, tourism becomes part of what McCrone (1998, p.49) refers to as the "iconography of the nation", providing an understanding of the national identity aspects and the ideological framing of history, nature, and tradition. If a reader takes a closer look at the people involved in tourism, he/she will first think of the inbound tourists, but only after that the reader may remember domestic tourism. However, domestic tourists often make up the largest tourism market. What is more, tourism industry greatly affects the environment, which makes the local population exposed to the narratives constructed around it, often on a daily basis.

¹ For more information see <https://traveling.by/press/1622-belarus-smenila-turisticheskiy-slogan>. Accessed November 18, 2020.

Nations tend to re-think their identity during the periods of social turbulence. One might claim that identification with a certain community of people united by the territory and history is a means of providing strength and hope from the intolerable conditions of turbulent times. Nowadays, for instance, Belarusian society itself discovers its country and its national identity anew, hence the “*Terra Incognita*” slogan is more topical for Belarusians than probably ever before. The Belarusian society is therefore facing a huge challenge to explore their national identity under the current influence of social and political unrest within the country and simultaneously pave the way to self-determination, democracy, and freedom. Rohava (2018), who researched Belarusian national identity, states that the national identity discussions in Belarus have been complicated by the lack of national consciousness among Belarusian citizens as a result of state independence in 1991, after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

The current turbulent period in Belarus started after the presidential elections took place in August 2020. The results caused disagreement among the citizens regarding the elections’ transparency and legitimacy as Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who has been the President for 26 years, was re-elected for his sixth term. One of the forms of public response to that was the re-evaluation of the national identity, historical and cultural legacy that was forgotten because of Soviet propaganda that is still persistent in Belarus in education and at workplaces. These are the reasons why my interest has been to investigate the representation of Belarusian national identity in tourism advertisements and, probably, open this “terra incognita” for myself, as a Belarusian citizen, and for those who will be interested in learning new facts about Belarusians as a nation with its own story to tell. However, in my MA thesis I am not aiming to evaluate the state ideology of Belarus, its disadvantages, but undertake research based on the categories identifying nationhood. The focus of my interest is the representation of national identity in advertisements promoting Belarus as a tourist destination.

I begin by the introduction of the key concepts significant for this thesis followed by the aim, objectives, and the research questions of this study. Chapter 2 provides insight into the brief historical and political background of Belarus and summarizes the current situation in the republic, which appeared after the presidential elections in August 2020. Chapter 3 presents the previous research on Belarusian identity and the general representation of national identity in advertisements. Moreover, this chapter demonstrates different approaches in the analysis of Belarusian national identity and identifies the research gap that influenced the writing of the following thesis. Furthermore, the chapter focuses on the theoretical framework that is utilized

in the analytical part of the thesis and the relevance of this framework for the purposes of the following study. The chapter on methodology outlines the data I am aiming to analyse, criteria for their selection, and the applicability of the chosen research method to the objectives of this study. In chapter 5, the analytic process is demonstrated, and the data is analysed through the chosen method for this study. By doing so, I identify the meanings contributing to Belarusian national identity portrayed in the tourist advertisements and explain their relevance to the Belarusians. The discussion chapter demonstrates the findings, outlines the observations and unexpected results, and explains the complex nature of Belarusian national identity. Finally, the conclusion chapter proposes suggestions for future research and evaluates the whole study.

1.1 Key concepts

According to Taylor and Spencer (2004), *identity* as a concept has a particular place in social sciences and political theory. For instance, identity embodies people's sense of uniqueness as individuals as well as group members in sharing the same values and beliefs. However, the concept of identity is an intensely political field, too. In critical theory identity is viewed as something that has emerged out of the voices demanding recognition. Bauman suggests that identity is examined by people when they are not sure where they belong (Bauman, 1996).

To be able to understand the essence of identity, certain questions must be asked whether there is a single self or a collection of social selves. Each person possesses a few social identities: father/mother, brother/sister, son/daughter, employee/employer, British/French citizen, and so on. As we can see from the given examples, it is possible for us to be both the single self as well as plural selves at the same time. We constantly monitor our self, and, as a result, the constant reassessing of the individual and collective identity is open to continuous change. Human identity is socially, historically, and culturally constructed. Even though each person individually assesses his/her own identity, in practice this is defined by shared codes that are given to us in childhood through the lived experiences, education, social encounters, and the specific traditions of a group representing its social codes (Bourdieu, 1990).

Ethnic identity is a politically charged field that usually divides societies by "us" and "other" ethnicities. Moreover, the tendency to refer to diverse groups of people as homogenous can be dangerous. Our identity is also shaped by its recognition or its absence. Misrecognition can inflict harm and be a form of oppression by the distortion of someone (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). For example, I have noticed that many people consider Belarusians to be Russians. Sometimes it makes no difference to a foreigner whether a person comes from Belarus or Russia, for many

foreigners it may be confusing to understand the differences in this case. In practice, although Belarus and Russia are “brother nations”, there are ethnic, historical, and cultural differences between these two countries that were blended under the influence of the USSR. I will further provide a brief historical and political background that will touch upon these issues in the next chapter of this study.

To sum it up, identity is a fluid concept, constantly being re-assessed and connected to the set of cultural meanings in a society. Cultural codes are also central to our sense of belonging and our collective identity. Moreover, identity is intensely political in its ways to shape meanings and images of others. Sometimes the relationships between these constructions reinforce power relations. Groups that have suffered marginalisation become politically aware of the politics of identity (Taylor & Spencer, 2004).

The next crucial term for this research is *national identity* itself. To understand this concept deeper, I consider it important to clarify what *nation* is. Wodak et al. (2009) states that there is no common definition of a nation as there is no universally accepted point of time from which one can describe a group of people as a nation. Nevertheless, there is an agreement regarding two conceptions of the nation: the political nature (*Willensnation* in German) and cultural definition (*Kulturnation*) of the nation. The concepts of *Willensnation* and *Kulturnation* were first coined by E. Renan (2018) who defined a nation as a “soul” that is defined by the shared memories, desire to live together and the shared will to preserve heritage. This definition explains the political nature of nation where people unite in solidarity to create a shared future and recognize a common past. However, the concept of *Willensnation* ignores objective criteria such as culture, language, and territory, which is for instance found in *Kulturnation* concept. Although, it can be argued that the language issue is an independent variable, and the language unity could also be the result of random factors since state borders do not often coincide with linguistic ones and there are communities that may have all these criteria, but which are not nations.

I believe nation is a mixture of both political and cultural components that exist together and influence each other. For instance, Smith (1983) argued that nation is a human population sharing a territory, common historical memories, myths, public culture, a common economy, and common duties for all members. This definition will be important in this research as it reflects the stance I am taking throughout the analysis of the data and result interpretation in this study.

Just as the definition of nation, the concept of *national identity* is a subject to continuous debates since it causes much disagreement and complexities (Verdrugo & Milne, 2016). For instance, such debates are related to the differences between identity, nationalism, and patriotism. Another important discussion is about the competing forms of identity, such as social class, race/ethnicity, and gender. However, the scholars agree on some points about the essence of national identity, for instance, that national identity is a sense of “belonging” to a nation or state.

National identity should not be confused with nationalism and patriotism (Verdrugo & Milne, 2016). *Nationalism* is a strong attachment to one’s country and the sense that it is superior to all others. *Patriotism* is a strong devotion to one’s country and one’s behavior in support of its decisions and policy. However, *national identity* is a sense of belonging to and being a member of a geopolitical entity, which means that this sense is not based on the approval or devotion to the country in the ideological practices. National identity is a more general term that expands its meaning far beyond the limits of patriotism and nationalism. Although national identity is not characterized by some ideological (political, economic) attachments, instead, it is rooted in kinship, heritage, and history.

Moreover, the discussions about national identity are based on essentialist and constructivist ideas that contribute to the understanding of the term of national identity. The supporters of essentialism view national identity as fixed, based on kinship, ethnicity, a shared history, and language (Huntington, 1996; Geertz, 1975). All these factors are based on history and culture and involve no political motive in their nature. On the contrary, the supporters of constructivism postulate that powerful groups create, manipulate, and dismantle identities for their specific gains (Hobsbawm, 1992). This approach is also used as a starting point for Anderson’s concept of “*imagined communities*” (1983), who posits that identity is an imagined construct. Individuals cannot interact with one another because there are too many people to be able to do it, so symbols and rituals are used as means for bonding, and individuals thus imagine they have a community with other members of society. Anderson (1983) argues that “imagined” in this context does not mean “fictionalized” but rather an unselfconscious and abstract thought. In this study, the terms “nation” and “imagined communities” are used interchangeably.

The definition and essence of national identity is a field of different opinions and interpretations regarding its origin. For example, whether national identity is based on ethnicity, common history, and other cultural markers or national identity is constructed and invented for

manipulation. This thesis supports the essentialist view on the understanding of national identity. However, I will not disregard the constructivist ideas either since they serve as an aid in understanding the political nation-building and its indicators. In the discussion chapter of the following thesis, I will look at the idea of nation-building mainly through the essentialist theory but at the same time, I will incorporate the constructivist viewpoints that will help identify elements of the political nation-building in Belarusian tourist advertisements. I think that national identity is based on both essentialist and constructivist ideas and the ratio of their influence within a particular nation depends on the state's history, main ideology, and culture.

In "The Identity of Nations" (2007), Montserrat Guibernau proposes the dimensions attributed to national identity. According to her, they are psychological, cultural, territorial, historical, and political. She argues that national identity is a collective idea based upon the belief of belonging to one nation and sharing most of the characteristics that differentiate it from other nations. The psychological dimension explains the process of forming a group based on the perceived unity of the people who belong to one nation. The cultural dimension is defined as common values, language(s), and practices of a particular nation; the territorial dimension, however, has been challenged by globalisation and used to revolve around family and administrative structures. The historical dimension explains the fact that members of a nation feel proud of their roots and that it is a sign of a nation's strength and resilience. The political dimension of national identity comes from the modern nation-state model of relation that seeks linguistic and cultural adaptation of a diverse population. The above-mentioned dimensions appear in several research articles on the interpretation of national identity markers depicted in advertisements (Hogan, 1999; Ryoo, 2005). Guibernau's dimensions will be a point of departure for my thesis to describe the national identity and its elements reflected in tourism advertisements.

As I have previously stated, identity contributes to our sense of belonging to a particular group thus shaping it in accordance with meanings, such as citizen/alien, Belarusian/ Ukrainian, and so forth. People produce meanings through languages of different kinds, including symbols, which stand for objects/people/events surrounding us in daily life. However, meanings can also refer to imaginary things and abstract ideas. S. Hall (1997) stresses that culture exists through shared meanings, and language is the means that makes sense of things. Language represents meanings assigned by people through signs and symbols to express ideas and feelings to others, which is constructed by signifying (meaning producing) practices. For instance, representation intertwines with a human identity, which Hall named "cultural representation", a concept from cultural studies that emerged in the 1960s. Each nation or "imagined community" possesses a

certain culture, a set of common values and practices that keep people together. Such beliefs, values and social practices are filled with meanings that groups assign to them. Cultural representation reflects meanings of social practices within daily life, actions that people perform in a certain way, and focuses on the meanings that people give to such habits and the objects used within them (Connor, 2010). According to Hall, meaning is not fixed, it is human-constructed and flexible. Hence, meaning is not straightforward and predictable; for this reason, different nations interpret social practices and customs in their own way, which might not be the same for the other. Understanding the meaning influences our feelings, causing various responses from an individual. Cultural representation of national identity is pivotal for the understanding the authenticity of a particular “imagined community”, its habits and customs, which contribute to nation-building and its recognition by the other communities.

1.2 Research questions

Advertisements are made of symbols and stereotypes, therefore, the analysis of national identity in advertising may provide information on how to think of a nation. Advertising appears as a “cultural mirror” which gives a subject symbolic values and identity (Yücel, 2019). Although the main purpose of advertising is to present the product/service, it also deals with values in the way that advertising reflects them. At the same time, it portrays social norms, beliefs, and national identities.

The aim of this study is to analyze ideological representations in the tourist advertising discourse that construct the national identity of Belarusians. The focus of my interest lies in analysing the advertisements targeted at the locals, as I assume such ads contain a lot of implicit and explicit symbols and signs that are familiar to many Belarusians and that have a direct connection to traditions, myths, and national heritage of the republic. Advertising themes incorporate mythic patterns and elements that echo the values and feelings of the viewer (Johar et al., 2013). Hence, each of the advertising messages can be considered to embody beliefs about social practices and identities of a particular community.

The study objectives are the following:

1. To collect a set of representative data from Belarusian tourist advertisements published since 2017.
2. To classify the data in accordance with the theoretical framework of this study.
3. To analyse and compare the results revealed during the analysis.

4. To formulate the most recurring cultural representations of Belarusian nation portrayed in the advertisements.
5. To evaluate the results and their contribution to nation-building of the local people.

In this thesis, I am aiming at researching the national identity of the Belarusians through the tourist advertisements targeted at the local population. To succeed in the chosen topic, I developed the following research questions that I am going to answer while analysing the collected data for the empirical part:

1. What markers of cultural representation (e.g., signs, symbols) seen in tourism advertising contribute to Belarusian identity?
2. What cultural connotations are given to the markers of cultural representation regarding Belarusian national identity?
3. Are there differences in the representation of national identity symbols in governmental and private tourist advertisements in Belarus?

Using signs and symbols to analyse advertising provides a better understanding of how and in what ways society's sense of unity is constructed, and what meaning such signs carry for its readers. In this way, advertising helps to reproduce values and practices related to Belarusian identity and enables the researcher to see certain facades of the nation. The collapse of the USSR made it necessary to explore and forge a national identity in every post-Soviet republic, and Belarus was not an exception, although this process has encountered its own challenges since the acquisition of Belarus' independence in 1991. In the next chapter, I will give a review of the political background in the Republic of Belarus so that the readers get a comprehensive knowledge of the historical and political peculiarities of this country located in Eastern Europe.

2 Political background of Belarus

Due to its pervasive function, advertising portrays national identities and participates in their discursive reproduction. Implicitly, advertisements usually carry political agenda of the country in question. Consequently, national identity is inseparably connected with the political situation in the country, and the country's fight for independence would result in more discussions regarding national identity. Hence, such discourses would stimulate a search for cultural and national distinctiveness. In the following article, I will analyse Belarus' current political situation and the factors that have influenced it.

Marples (1999) describes Belarus as a “denationalized nation” due to its history and the language issue that have shaped the mindset of a Belarusian citizen. Before its membership in the USSR Belarus did not exist as a country with its own territory we are used to know. The present-day territories of Belarus used to belong partially to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (XIII-XVI cc.), the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (XVI-XVIII cc.), and the Russian Empire (XVIII-XX cc.). In Belarus, the process of the formation of a modern nation started in the late XIX – early XX centuries, when Belarus was a part of the Russian Empire. There appeared the national movement led by the national elite and its goal was to revive the traditions of the past, Belarusian language, literature, and create a nation-state based on Belarus' unique features such as history, culture and language. The Russian Empire was not interested in promoting the literacy among Belarusians and viewed the territory as the agricultural province in the West. Only in the XIX century, the Russian administration introduced the name “Belarus” as a formal designation for the territory (Smok, 2013). At the same time, the Russian authorities conducted an economic policy of weakening the region in order to better control Belarus as they feared the expansion of the Polish minority present in their Northwest region. Hence, such a policy of the Russian Empire prevented the consolidation of a clear national identity.

The next step which influenced the nation most, was its 70 years under the communist rule. The communists sought to create a nationless state by blurring the lines between all soviet republics. Russian culture and the Russian language were taken as a basis for a soviet nation. Nationalists in different soviet republics from the Baltic region to Central Asia kept their local languages regardless of the strong position of Russian being the official language. Unlike the other Soviet republics, Belarus developed an unusual form of nationalism which, despite an often anti-Russian position, uses Russian instead of imposing the country's own national language (Fabrykant, 2019, p.1).

Independent Belarus appeared on the map because of the USSR breakup in 1991. Topolski (2009, p.7) stresses that Belarus itself did not have state traditions, and most residents have not been even identifying residents with the new state after the collapse of the USSR. Gaining state independence meant freedom from Moscow's top-down commands and the necessity of establishing an independent state apparatus, shaping all internal and external politics. Right after the USSR's collapse, Belarusian nationalists viewed the new period of Belarusian history as a fresh start to revive the national spirit and identity. They began to glorify the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a truly Belarusian state and adopted the state symbols that had been used in 1918-1919 by the nationalist movement. In 1992, these became the official insignia of independent Belarus, and the Belarusian language was proclaimed the only official language of Belarus (Ioffe, 2003).

But the prospects of another attempt to revive the ethno-national Belarusian state were not realized. The 1994 presidential elections brought Aliaksandr Lukashenka, a young Member of Parliament, to power. Shortly after the election, Lukashenka started a policy of russification. He chose Russia to be the strategic partner of the republic in contrast to the opposition's hopes, who were pro-Western in their views. Official propaganda described all members of the opposition as nationalist and accused it of hatred towards Belarusians. In 1995, Lukashenka initiated a referendum to introduce Russian as a second official language in Belarus. Officially, 83.3% of voters supported the initiative. From this point onward, the Belarusian language has suffered a major decline. Although the Constitution of Belarus declares the equal status of both languages, Russian nevertheless dominates all spheres of life (Smok, 2013). Moreover, Lukashenka also initiated the process of changing the national symbols back to the ones used in Belarus during the Soviet times. According to Ioffe (2003), Belarus is the only post-Soviet country that returned its Soviet insignia. Speaking about the propaganda, the core element of it has become the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet interpretation of history and Soviet holidays.

Remarkably, Aliaksandr Lukashenka has been the only President of Belarus for the last 26 years. The main controversy about the elections is that they remain democratic only in the papers. Foreign observers expressed their concerns regarding the fairness of the elections (for example, creation of artificial attendance at elections, multiple voting for one candidate, and passive attitude and consent of electoral commission members for such activities) (Bajek, 2018).

Gurieva and Treisman (2020) presented a theory of informational autocracy that shows the shift of old school non-democratic regimes to their modern version that uses mass media as the tool of propaganda to explain and persuade the people in the leader's competence and legitimacy. Informational autocracy has the features of a modern democratic state with courts, parliament, and elections. Regardless of these facts, the opposition is not allowed to appear in newspapers, television, or radio. Another feature of such regimes is the presence of private media as one more sign of democracy. Nevertheless, private media could be bribed or strictly censored to show the content the officials prefer to see. The last tool of informational autocracy is its relation to the national elites. As I have already mentioned, in the beginning of the XX century Belarusian elite could not spread their progressive ideas in Belarus to form the national identity of Belarusians due to the strict control of the state and mass repressions; today the picture is almost the same but portrayed by the state differently. The elites, who are attempting to raise national awareness of Belarusians, are sent away from the country, although the media cover such news as if the elite ran away from the Motherland because they are cowards, and not because they are persecuted by the state as the news showed, when the presidential candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and some of her team members had to leave Belarus after the controversial elections in August 2020.

Hence, Smok (2013) mentions that because of the current ideological discourse the majority of Belarusians still have a rather weak national identity. Most of all, their national identity is based on the territory they live in. Ideological discourse introduced by the President has a massive impact on the understanding of national identity. It presents nationalist and Soviet concepts and therefore creates the same mixed view in the minds of people, who know their ancestors come from somewhere in the West, but at the same time they should respect the Soviet legacy. The national identity is "de-nationalized" due to the insignificant role of the Belarusian language in the country and the nostalgia about the Soviet past.

However, the idea of past-oriented nation-building in Belarus envisioned by Lukashenka failed. It sounded less appealing to the younger generation as time passed. Moreover, it sounded close to the ideas of the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*), an ideologically constructed concept by the Russian state, aimed at re-uniting historic Russia and Russian-speaking lands, and thus contradicted Lukashenka's wish to be "father" of Belarusian sovereignty. Additionally, the crisis in Ukraine in 2015 showed that the policy of russification is not effective in the former Soviet republics and leads to revolutions and disorder. So, the revolution in Ukraine and the strong national identity of Ukrainians revitalized the interest of Belarusians in the

reconsideration of Belarus' past, language, and culture. News from Ukraine has also become a stimulus to rethink people's views of themselves and the group they consider themselves to belong to. Gradually, more and more people started to use the national symbols adopted in 1918 and the Belarusian language as the sign of opposition and revival of Belarusian national identity with its diverse past.

Under the influence of these factors, the President started the policy of "soft Belarusianization" (Moshes and Nizhnikau, 2019, p.7) which meant an increase in the presence of the Belarusian language, highlighting the national values, symbols, and uniqueness of the nation. Furthermore, significant attempts have been made to make Belarus an open country for foreign tourists, as Belarus was previously a popular destination for predominantly Russian tourists. In 2017, the president decree enabled travelling to Belarus for 120 hours visa-free provided they crossed the border at the Minsk National Airport. One year later the President signed the second decree which states the foreign citizens are allowed to stay in Belarus for up to 30 days without the visas provided they crossed the border at the Minsk National Airport. According to Belarus' Telegraph Agency, the tourist flow to Belarus in 2019 increased by 62% in comparison to the year of 2018². Such strategy of increasing the tourist numbers from abroad by alleviating the visa regime helped Lukashenka to gain popularity among the locals. Moreover, during these years, the National Tourism Agency prepared e-brochures in Russian, English, German, French, Chinese, and Arabic languages to promote tourism to Belarus.

Due to the recent news from Belarus regarding presidential elections held in August 2020, the whole world has witnessed the rise of Belarusian national self-awareness. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the presidential candidate, claimed the elections to be falsified, not transparent, and that "Lukashenka lost all his legitimacy in the eyes of our [Belarusian] nation and the world"³. After sending Tsikhanouskaya in exile, which once again draws the line with the regime of informational autocracy, Belarus for the first time in its modern history experienced the rise of national identity and solidarity among the people who went to peaceful protests in their cities and towns. People started to use the Belarusian language more and more. Every day independent media post videos of Belarusians singing songs in Belarusian on the

² For more information see <https://www.belta.by/society/view/turisticheskij-potok-v-belarus-po-bezvizu-vyros-na-62-359164-2019/>. Accessed March 11, 2021.

³ For more information see <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-rejects-belarus-presidential-election-result/a-54622050>. Accessed March 11, 2021.

streets of Minsk, citing Belarusian poets, reading books by Belarusian novelists in public places, and giving interviews in Belarusian.

By giving this relatively short account of Belarusian political background and analysing it, I wanted to introduce the peculiarity and complexity of Belarusian national identity due to its history and current political agenda. As we can see, the national identity in Belarus is still developing, and during the period of writing this thesis, we are following daily changes happening in Belarus and can only imagine the outcome of the current political crisis and national identity rebirth there.

3 Literature review

3.1 Previous research on Belarusian identity

Several researchers have already tried to give an answer to what Belarusian national identity is. They studied it through the meanings that different national holidays carry for the interviewees and the symbols that come to the minds of the Belarusians when talking about their Motherland. Another important factor through which the researchers try to understand the national identity is the language. Due to the complicated history of Belarus, the influence of the Belarusian language on national identity has been an uneasy subject to study. This section will review the previous work done in the aforementioned domains.

Rohava (2018) researched the way ordinary people interpret the essence of national identity during talks in a quasi-public setting. When scholars talk about Belarusian national identity, Belarus is described as a country struggling with the identity discourses under an autocratic regime. To study the foundations of Belarusian national identity, she interviewed 36 Belarusian citizens in 6 focus groups. While dividing the participants into groups, the author tried to group the people based on similarities in age, education, and employment. The participants were not acquainted with each other prior to taking part in this study. The author identified, beforehand, several identity markers that would constitute the frame of the discussions. These were displayed to the participants during the conversation to keep the discussion on track (for example, “land”, “state”, “people”, and “ethnic identifiers”). The study demonstrated that these topics appeared to be the most controversial and important in each focus group. According to the outcomes of the study, most of the participants identify with the country through the notion of territory and the natural peculiarities of Belarus such as lakes, forests, national parks, and symbolic Belarusian animals. They view these associations as neutral, without the difficulties of potential controversies. Another marker that many of the participants agreed with are sporting achievements since they enhance the recognition of the republic on the international map. The trigger for disagreements among the participants became the political situation in the country and national symbols where people expressed their critique of the discourse of the government. Politics appeared to be a sensitive subject, as the participants tried to change the subject of the topic, expressed their concerns of being under surveillance, or used euphemisms (for example, “the Sun-like” or “father-figure” meaning the President of Belarus). Hence, Rohava’s study portrayed that Belarusian citizens are likely to associate themselves with neutral symbols of the country, rather than be associated with the autocratic regime and politics in general.

Other scholars have analysed the influence of the Belarusian language on the perception of national identity in the republic. Fabrykant (2019) chose to research this issue through the history books by the local authors. The language of the books was both Russian (two books), one of which is used as a university book, and Belarusian (one book). The idea of Fabrykant's research was to study the peculiarity of Belarusian Russian-speaking nationalism. The author analysed the content throughout the periodization of Belarusian history, the interpretation of most significant events in Belarus' past, the protagonists, and the juxtaposition of the narratives with non-narrative fragments (Fabrykant, 2019, p.11). The results of this comparison show how Russian-speaking Belarusian nationalism challenges the idea of the national language as the means of nation-building. The book analysis showed that Belarus possesses a national history narrative. One of the books which was written by a Belarusian nationalist suggests that Belarusian national history differs from the official narratives. A remarkable feature is that for pragmatic reasons, Belarusian nationalists adopted Russian as their first language, but this does not mean that they embrace the ideas of "Russian World" with its values, history interpretations and expansionist policy at all. The idea of the history books was to manifest the distinctiveness between two nations regardless of the common usage of Russian. However, the programmatic text of the new Belarusian nationalists displays hostility not only towards Russians but also towards Poles and Lithuanians in geopolitical context (Fabrykant, 2019, p.18).

In their further studies of Belarusian national identity some researchers have analysed the history of Belarus, its struggle to have its own territory and be recognized in the whole world as a separate state (Ioffe, 2003). Ioffe's study is also completed by analysing literary classics written by recognized Belarusian writers, such as Yanka Kupala (1882-1942). His most known play, "Tuteishiya" ("locals" in Belarusian), which was written in 1922, was banned by the Soviet government because the author showed Russian expansionism as a mirror image of Polish expansionism in relation to the territory of Belarus. The play is as topical today as in the 1920s. For example, during the unrest after the elections in August 2020, the director of The Yanka Kupala theatre was fired by the government for his support of the protests. Following his dismissal, most of his actors resigned in order to support their director. In September 2020, they launched a channel on YouTube⁴ and uploaded their premiere of Kupala's play "Tuteishiya", which carries symbolic meaning for the Belarusians who are interested in exploring their identity. Studying non-dominant European ethnic groups, Hroch (1985) defined

⁴ Kupalautsy [YouTube Channel]. YouTube. Retrieved January 4, 2021, from https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoS4_e9Re3RGf1obN_6Wepw

three deficiencies they possess: they possessed no state, they lacked their own nobility or ruling classes, and their literary tradition in their own language was incomplete or interrupted. Ioffe (2003) states that Belarusians fit this definition in all three criteria. Moreover, he also noted that the identity frustrations of Belarusians are related to the position of Belarus between Poland and Russia and the necessity of the people to distance themselves from the associations with either of those nations. Such a process is a complicated one, as the western part of Belarus is Catholic that tends to associate itself with the Poles while the Eastern part is predominantly Orthodox and identify with the Russians. Due to this constant conflict, Belarusians suffer from “a collective split identity disorder” (Ioffe, 2003, p.27). Their identity is two-faced, and it is their uneasy coexistence and the pendulum effect this causes constitutes Belarusian national identity.

Titarenko (2009) develops the idea of “pendulum effect” further and researches Belarus as a model of “borderland civilization” where civilization is viewed as a special type of cultural community living in a territorial space and united by common myths about their history and common cultural values (Lipkin, 2008, p.113). She has also claimed that Belarusian nationality combines the features of opposite cultures: for instance, Catholicism and Orthodoxy as two official national religions. Moreover, borderland nature is connected to political issues where western and eastern political views collide. Belarus is a good example of such political games, where being “pro-Russian” means to bring more profit politically and economically, hence, causing dissatisfaction from the opposition, typically viewed as “pro-Western” because it creates more dependence on Russia, neglects Belarusian culture and language, and increases Russia’s influence in Belarusian internal affairs. Belarusians do not really acknowledge that they belong to a borderland civilization due to the political reasons. Titarenko (2009) suggests the necessity of elites in the construction of the national idea of Belarus and national consciousness. With the help of the elite, it could be possible to help recognize Belarusian cultural heritage as a part of an Eastern-European borderland civilization with a unique cultural code.

By presenting the findings of previous studies on Belarusian identity I wanted to show the different approaches to analyse it through the prism of history, language situations, and quasi-public talks about the perceptions of belonging to Belarus.

3.2 National identity in advertisements

While searching for the literature that studies the representation of the Belarusian national identity in advertisements, it turned out that this topic has not been researched yet. Therefore, this finding created a good research niche for me. Consequently, I searched for the articles that deal with the representation of national identities in printed media and national webpages.

In Ryoo's (2005) study of the Korean advertisements in quality newspapers from South Korea, advertisements are viewed as the means of empirical resistance and ideologically functioning products created for the reader relying on his/her background and cultural knowledge. Apart from advertising goods or services, advertisements bear the cultural meaning of a nation. The reader must read codes between the lines, which is especially valid for high context cultures like Korean. According to Hall (1981), high-context cultures are intuitive and contemplative and tend to utilize indirect and ambiguous messages, while low-context cultures are analytical and action-oriented, tending to use clearly articulated and spoken messages. Besides, the analysis requires the knowledge of the culture and shared values of the society in question. Another important fact to bear in mind is the colonial past of South Korea which influenced the national identity of Koreans greatly. The major themes of Korean advertising according to Ryoo (2005, p.9) are collective/family values; reconciliation/equality (between generations, between classes, etc.); nationalism/patriotism; high-context culture; and the postmodern consumer culture articulated by Koreanness. Moreover, the analysis of advertisements reveals some important discursive strategies about the way readers and advertisements articulate with each other and within the historical context of the researched country. It is likely that ideology and history play a big role in the formation of national identity through the advertisements. For example, many ads bear hidden links to Korean history, their colonial past under the USA, and a series of wars. The study also suggests that Korea has incorporated modern western culture in one form or another (Ryoo, 2005, p.15) based on the visual side of the ads and the implicit meanings in them.

Another interesting way to promote national identity is to include meaningful identity markers in nation branding. Dinnie (2016) defines nation branding as a synthesis of components that culturally differentiate the nation for its target audiences. Nation branding works both internationally and internally by facilitating the recognition of international audiences and stressing the uniqueness of the country for its own citizens too. Nas (2017) analysed the textual and visual means in which Turkey expresses its national identity for the Turks and a global audience. The data included the website of the campaign launched by the Turkish Exporters

Assembly to introduce Turkey and its potential to global audiences. The website includes sections such as Discover the Potential, History, Brand, News, and others. The sections of particular interest for the author were Discover the Potential, History and Brand since they include significant narratives regarding the ways in which the nation is represented by the policymakers and conveyed to audiences as well as to the citizens of Turkey. Using the analysis of the images, captions and TV ads supporting the campaign, the author concluded that their narrative reveals four core values of Turkish national identity: long-term vision, courage, entrepreneurialism, and adaptability. By advertising the potential of the country, the creators use references to the country's history (e.g., civilizational inheritance and the meeting point of the East and West), national values that derive from the influence of western and eastern traditions, harmony, and openness for the international dialogue. Nas (2017) argues that nation branding is a complex process that carries foreign policy objectives through national representations although this subject should be researched in more detail to see if the citizens admit to and internalize these representations.

The connection between nation branding and national identity was also analysed by Zantides (2016). So far, this article appears to be the only scientific work that traces the reflection of national identity in tourism advertisements. The reason for his study was to explore the tourist advertisements of Cyprus and check how the Cypriot national identity of Cypriots is expressed through these ads. The work identifies the extent to which culture and national identity are shown through tourist ads. To achieve these goals, the study used both content analysis and a semiotic interpretation of advertisements. Barthes' (1977) theoretical model of depicting coded and non-coded messages was used to interpret the photographic messages. The semiotic analysis of the image deals with reading, analysing the image and explaining its significance in the sign system. This process represents a symbolic interaction between the denotative and the connotative meanings. Barthes argued that the photographic image contains two messages: the first without a code, which is denoted (strict meaning), and the second with a code, which is connoted (imaginative associations a word may possess). The semiotic analysis utilized in the study showed nine cultural meanings peculiar to Cypriot tourist ads: hellenicity, escapism, hospitality, sensuality, collectiveness, ecology, activity, historic authenticity, and sociability (Zantides, 2016, p, 11). The research testifies that the cultural meaning in the ads contribute to the framework of national identity saying that it is formed through the practices of the everyday (Edensor, 2002). Zantides (2016) also concludes that the content of tourist ads does not completely depend on the demands of a global tourist market, but also on the way a state wants

to appear and be perceived both internally and externally, especially during a turbulent political period in the country, in order to promote values such as peace, reconciliation and tolerance.

The review of previous research has demonstrated that the Belarusian national identity has been researched by a limited number of scholars. Their research concentrates on the way Belarusians interpret the symbols important to their country, the influence of the national language on the formation of national identity, and the borderland national identity of Belarusians. Consequently, there is a gap in the existing literature regarding the markers of national identity portrayed in the Belarusian media. This gap and the problem of further investigation of Belarusian national identity motivated me to write about it in my thesis. Further research on this topic is relevant to consider since the current situation of political unrest affects the reconsideration of what is genuinely Belarusian, and what the rise of civic society is in Belarusian context.

3.3 Theoretical framework

As a starting point for my theoretical framework, I have decided to use the concept of nation branding. The branding of nations is a recent phenomenon that started to be practiced at the end of the Cold War in 1990s. The term was first used by marketing specialist Simon Anholt. According to him (Anholt, 2007), with the dominance of the global market, nation branding focuses on differentiation of a nation highlighting its unique identity among others in order to contest for tourism, trade and investments. Nation branding consists of political, historical, economic, and cultural dimensions. Hence, the aim of nation branding can be characterized by the creation of an idea built around qualities which can be illustrated in the texts and images. One way to achieve this aim is to promote the country as a destination for tourism. A nation brand does not offer any material product, it rather embodies a variety of associations regarding the nation in question. Anholt states that nation branding is an essential tool for Third World countries in developing their economy, but first they must find a product or service which is competitive. Such campaigns portray government aspirations and national identities to international audiences. Moreover, branding also interprets national identity through the ideas of marketing and provides new descriptions for internal utilization.

In the context of historical time, all nation states are recent, post-Enlightenment inventions, which are continuously built (Jansen, 2008). The way in which the government represents the nation promotes a distinct understanding of the prominent features of citizens, which leads to

the representation of the nation in a particular way. In this regard, nation branding also brings about the reproduction of the core values of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983).

Imaginary communities are a concept within the framework of the theory of nation developed by Benedict Anderson in his book of the same name in which he views the nation as a socially constructed community imagined by people who view themselves a part of it. National perception must symbolically mark and justify claims of territorial integrity, raise a sense of national identity as well as imply continuity with a shared past and visualize a shared sense of destiny. This origin story becomes part of the collective consciousness of a nation (Jansen, 2008).

An imaginary community is different from a real community because it cannot be based on the everyday communication of its members. Anderson (1983) notes that the nation is imaginary, since members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-nationals, meet with them or even hear about them, while in the minds of each of them the image of their community lives. These communities are imagined as something limited and sovereign. It is limited because a nation always implies the existence of other nations; it is sovereign because nations always strive for autonomy.

Nation branding also embodies the idea of an “imagined community” aimed at the internal audience. Practices of branding become the way of seeking a common goal for the national project, a way of affirming certain values and shunning others (Valaskivi, 2013, p.7). The literature on branding suggests that the nation should develop into a better version of itself. Bolin and Ståhlberg (2010) claim that although branding is based on competition and comparison among nations, branding is nevertheless first and foremost directed inwards, towards the nation itself and aimed at creating a stronger, more coherent sense of the national “self”. The coherent sense of self and healthy national self-esteem are considered necessary for credible branding. Branding is done on the national level; therefore, it attempts to provide a sense of belonging among the members of an “imagined community”, attract people of the country to join the shared effort of building the image of a branded nation.

Belarus has been intensively working on the strategy of a tourism brand since 2017, which is a part of nation branding. The project was financed by the EU, the main partner was the Sports and Tourism Ministry of the Republic of Belarus. The focus of my interest in this thesis is how the research on national tourism brand is reflected in the advertisements and which symbols of national identity representation are found there.

An imaginary community is constructed and conveyed in the discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture. Hall & du Gay (1996, p.612) define nations not only as political constructs but also as “systems of cultural representations” through which an imagined community is interpreted: “People are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the idea of the nation as represented in its national culture. A nation is a symbolic community ...”. Hall sees national identity as an example and at the same time a form of national cultural identity.

As a starting point for the main theoretical framework I am planning to utilize, I will introduce Hall’s five “discursive strategies” of national culture. They are as follows:

1. The first aspect is the *narrative of the nation*. It is manifested in national literature, in the media and in everyday culture and it creates a connection between stories, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols and national rituals which represent shared experiences, history, and values.
2. The second aspect is *the emphasis on origins, tradition, and continuity*. National identity is represented in narratives of national culture as the original identity which is present in the nature of things. This aspect aims at an image of national character as an unchanging and uniform being.
3. The third aspect is called *invention of tradition*. Invented traditions (e.g., a ritual) transform disorder into the community.
4. The *myth of origin* is often set so far back in time that it is lost in time and is no longer “real”, it exists somewhere in “mythical” times.
5. Finally, the fictitious idea of a “*pure, original people or “folk”*” (Hall & du Gay, 1996, p. 615) is employed to support a national identity.

Wodak et al. (2009, p.24) argues that this classification brings several difficulties when one tries to separate the five aspects from each other in order to analyse the data. For instance, aspects 2, 3, 4 and 5 could easily be viewed as subcomponents of aspect 1. Aspects 2, 4 and probably 5 are also rather difficult to separate if one critically analyses Hall and du Gay’s characterisation. The authors suggest that Hall & du Gay’s classification lack clarity between the elements and has to be further explained in more detail. So, due to a certain degree of confusion between aspects, I will concentrate on its first aspect, *the narrative of the nation*, as

it is the main aspect and synthesises the other four aspects from his classification. Moreover, it clearly represents the idea of national culture and national identity as its significant part.

Hogan (1999) classified markers of national identity using Hall & du Gay's model, especially their idea of the narrative of the nation that provided material for developing her "conventions" (Hogan, 1999, p.9). She originally arranged these "conventions" for her research on the gendered national identities in television advertisements of Japan and Australia. Her classification consists of appeals based on:

- a. Geography (distinctive landscapes and landmarks, flora and fauna),
- b. Leisure practices (popular pursuits such as traditional games, hobbies),
- c. Cultural heritage (references to the arts, distinctive costumes, flags, famous persons),
- d. Social relationships and social values (family, friends, modes of social relations).

Hogan suggests that such categorization enables us to see the general patterns of national identity representation in the ads. Besides, she also states that sometimes ads may combine several categories within one ad (for example, an ad featuring a woman in kimono viewing cherry blossoms appeals to Japanese national identity on the basis of both cultural heritage and geography (Hogan, 1999, p.10)). Hogan's research on national identities represented in the TV ads of Japan and Australia reveals the two-faced nature of globalization, leading to both cultural diversity and reassertion of traditions and national identity.

I decided to choose this theoretical framework, as it includes a well-structured arrangement of the markers of cultural representation in advertising and enables the researcher to trace the embodiment of the symbols of national identity both implicitly and explicitly. The national identity symbols create a nation brand in a certain way by building and reinforcing "imagined community" marked by the country's territory. The particular area of interest for me is whether Belarusian tourism ads are representative of national identity and, thus, used as a means to boost it internally within the country. Moreover, in my research, I will analyse whether all the conventions regarding national identity are found in Belarusian tourism ads and whether there is something else, not represented in Hogan's classification.

4 Methodology

4.1 Data: official online tourism resources in Belarus

For the analysis in the empirical part of this thesis, 44 images and snapshots from Belarusian online travel resources were selected. These resources were collected by typing key phrases in the Google search box, which are “tourism in Belarus” and “travel to Belarus”. The chosen materials target both domestic and inbound tourism. While selecting the data, the attention was paid to the year of publishing – it was decided to select the ads from the year 2018 onwards. The grounds for this choice of the mentioned time period are:

- a. As I am exploring the national identity in Belarus influenced by the recent changes in the civic society within the country, I considered it crucial to choose modern data. This way, my research would be more representative and reflect the current trends regarding the most used symbolic images and their connection to the reinforcement of Belarusian national identity.
- b. In 2017, Belarusian National Tourism Agency launched a project aimed at tourism marketing and development of the national tourism brand of Belarus that was financed by the EU. One of the aims of the following strategy is “...to strengthen country’s image within Belarus and, thus, stimulate a sense of national pride in Belarus”⁵. So, the idea of the project was to influence the target audience both outside and inside the country. This is the reason why the materials published since 2017 are of particular attention to me in this research.

To be able to answer one of the research questions in this thesis, I had to look for both public and private online resources. For instance, I used the materials published on the National Tourism Agency official page as a public sector source. I chose this Agency since it is a branch of the Sports and Tourism Ministry of the Republic of Belarus. This institution is familiar to every Belarusian citizen and is responsible for the promotion of tourism and development of national policy in the sphere of tourism. National Tourism Agency’s webpage includes the brochures that have been published since 2017. Each brochure is issued in eight languages: Russian, Polish, German, English, French, Chinese, Arabic, and Hebrew. As a rule, these brochures are usually distributed at international tourism exhibitions and in diplomatic missions

⁵ For more information see <https://www.belarustourism.by/upload/iblock/80a/80a44c4b9c9a499c33e39c225dff8e5.pdf>. Accessed February 26, 2021.

of Belarus abroad, although the e-versions of these brochures are published online⁶. For my analysis, I selected the images from several brochures called “*Naydi Svoyu Belarus*” (“Discover Your Belarus”), “*Ekologicheskiy Turizm v Belarusi*” (“Eco-Tourism in Belarus”), and “*Promyshlenniy Turizm v Belarusi*” (“Industrial Tourism in Belarus”). All the brochures used in the following study are published in the Russian language. Moreover, to get a wider picture of the markers representing Belarusian identity, I will also analyse the videos “*Kulturno-poznavatelnyi turizm v Belarusi*” (“Cultural and Educational Tourism in Belarus”) and “*Belarus. Vishe Ozhidaniy*” (“Belarus. Beyond Expectations”). These videos are published on the official channel of the National Agency for Tourism in Belarus in the years 2020 and 2018 respectively. Besides, the shortened versions of these videos were also shown on national TV a couple of years ago. Therefore, the selected materials for the empirical part are found in people’s daily life, not only on the Internet. Another important point for me was the language used in the materials. I decided to select the Russian version of the e-brochures and videos as they are targeted at the local population and may carry symbols and images familiar to every Belarusian.

To represent the private sector, I chose an online tourist guide *Yes! Belarus*. This project works closely with private businesses and local authorities and aims at building Belarus’ brand and image. Another source of private ads for me was the e-page of *Primetour*, one of the leading incoming travel companies that captures all areas of tourism: ecological, cultural, leisure, and business. When analysing the materials from this source, I used the ads on their web page in Russian and *Primetour*’s e-brochure called “Welcome to Belarus” published in English as they, unfortunately, did not have a Russian version of it. It is worth mentioning that due to the peculiarities of Belarusian policy, the government has a monopoly in many spheres, leaving few private institutions. For this reason, the choice for the private organizations was quite limited but, nevertheless, these names should be familiar to the Internet users at least.

The images and snapshots from the videos I used for my research are found in the Appendices. Appendix A demonstrates the public sector advertisements and Appendix B contains the tourist advertisements from private companies.

⁶ For more information see <https://marketing.by/keysy/natsagentstvo-po-turizmu-i-pocketrocket-vypustili-broshyury-o-belarusi-na-vosmi-yazykakh/>. Accessed February 26, 2021.

In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss the methods applied in the following research, provide their background information, and justify its relevance in answering the research questions of my thesis.

4.2 Visual semiotics within the mixed method

For my research, I chose to utilize a mixed methodology. The mixed methods research is the type of research that combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research methods (use of qualitative and quantitative perspectives, data collection, and analysis). The purpose of this methodology is to achieve breadth and depth of understanding the research objectives (Johnson et al., 2007). The main idea of the mixed methodology method is to expand and strengthen the study's outcomes and, hence, contribute to the literature on the topic.

The rationale for combining qualitative and quantitative methods in this study seeks to interpret meaning from the collected data that help understand cultural representation markers attributed to the depiction of Belarusian identity collected from the tourist advertisements. Through the study of targeted ads, I analysed what meanings people create in the discourse of their national identity. The selection process of the data for this thesis revealed that to be able to find the most representative symbols of cultural representation the data must be credible. Consequently, credibility is achieved here by analysing a bigger body of the data to provide a comprehensive study of the topic.

Bryman (2006) argues that by bringing qualitative and quantitative methods together, the research aims to be more complete as it demonstrates a comprehensive account of the area under research. He also adds that a mixed method illustrates the study results in a broad manner since it refers to the use of qualitative data to illustrate quantitative findings. Therefore, by demonstrating the cultural connotations in the objects found in the advertisements, I am aiming to illustrate them with the most representative images. To be more illustrative in this case, the research should include a bigger number of images to provide the readers with a wide picture of Belarusian national identity as it may be challenging to illustrate such a broad topic in a limited set of examples.

In this research, I applied the semiology analysis method that is often utilized in media studies. The term "*semiotic*" in European languages comes from the word "*semeion*" in Ancient Greek which means "sign, indicator". In semiotic theory, a sign is anything that stands for something else in the mind of someone. A sign consists of an expression, such as a word, symbol, or sound, and a content that gives meaning to the expression (Hjemslev, 1961). For example, a lily in

some cultures is a symbol connected to death, Easter, and resurrection as a content. Such connections assign social and subjective meanings to a sign. A sign would be incomplete if it was not for an interpretant. When the interpretant changes, signs change meanings, too.

Semiotics (also called semiology) was first mentioned by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century. He explained this relation of signs and meanings in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1966) as the marriage between a sound or an image— *a signifier* —and the concept for which it stands— *the signified* (Moriarty, 2005). The signifier has a material nature, while the signified is not a thing but the mental representation of things and the outside world.

Nowadays semiotics has been transferred to media qualitative research taking inspiration from the linguistic tradition as a method of analysis. Moreover, visual semiotics is one of the major branches of media analysis in the context of non-verbal communication. The semiotic analysis of the visual signs deals with reading and analysing the image and explaining its significance in the sign system. Thus, semiologist Roland Barthes (1968) and cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (1999) have extended the concepts of signified and signifier by developing notions of connotation and denotation. Denotation, the first level of signification, is the direct, or literal meaning we get from a sign. It is a representation of the signified—that is the visual perception of an object. Thus, denotation of the visual image refers to what all people see without association to their culture, ideology, or society (Bouzida, 2014). Connotation is meaning the object evokes, meaning what it represents subjectively. For Barthes, connotation is a reproduction of the message; it is a product of mental abilities responsible for reading between the lines. Connotative meaning is the “cultural baggage” attached to the object which is derived from past experiences or repeated associations between a sign and its object (Moriarty, 2005).

Additionally, Roland Barthes noted that semiology analyses the system of signs regardless of their substance: images, gestures, musical sounds, and objects. Semiology as a method aims to analyse and interpret connotative data in order to explain empirically how media generate meanings derived from the signs, hence, the image is a language that is open to many interpretations and significance.

A good example of denotation-connotation relation is given in Moriarty’s (2005) article about visual semiotics theory:

A soft drink is a particular type of beverage with a specific type of flavor (denotative meaning). However, in the advertising it is associated with young teen boys having fun at

a skateboard rink to connote such things as cool, not adult, but more importantly, an escape from work and responsibility (pp.231-232).

A substantial part of the message in advertisements is conveyed through connotations that are portrayed visually in subtle ways to extend what appears to be a simple message. Most of these connotative meanings operate in the nonverbal mode and require analytical skills from an interpretant.

In the empirical part of this thesis, I first identified denotative meanings for the images in the materials selected for this study. This is followed by the description of what is portrayed in the pictures that a common reader not originally from Belarus would see in those ads without any subjective interpretation. However, applying the ideas of visual semiotics we would be able to disclose the “hidden” information regarding culture, national history, values, and other symbols that make up Belarusian national identity. However, signs in ads rarely just denote something. For this reason, after identifying the obvious signs I described the connotative meanings of the images. Connotations in this case come from culture and are often easily recognized for those who grew up in it. To be able to define connotative meanings of the objects in the advertisements I used Belarusian official online resources such as newspaper webpages and the official website of the Republic of Belarus *Belarus.by*.

Tourism is a visual industry; thus semiotics, the study of signs, was chosen for this research because of its ability to analyse the representations of national identity a Belarusian would develop by looking at the tourist ads and “decoding” the implicit symbols and texts that stand behind the visual side of advertisements. Images have meanings, and these meanings are to be interpreted by the reader. In this thesis, I analysed the ads from my cultural perspective and background. I consider it a benefit to the current study, as I am a Belarusian who has lived there for 25 years and had enough time to get familiar with history, language, and national culture. This advantage helped me see the cultural meanings behind the visual image of the ads, further interpret and classify them.

However, in my research, I faced several obstacles while conducting the empirical part of it. Bouzida (2014) argues that the image is a non-verbal language that is open to many interpretations. The photographic image has two co-existent messages: the first without a code which is denoted and the second with a code that is connoted. Connotative meaning requires a viewer to make sense of the visual side, explain it from the point of view of the implicit context there. Hence, ads might have complex and often multiple meanings that are not easy to trace

and decode. Some symbols could be unconsciously not recognized or taken for granted (Bignell, 2002). It is important to keep in mind that such signs may be working in many ways and that there is no universal truth in their interpretation.

Taking these subtleties in mind, I used Barthes' (1982) ideas from his essay "The Photographic Message" to describe connotation procedures used by photographers and editors to add meaning to their works. In this framework, he describes six aspects that cause a second, connotative meaning of the photograph:

1. *Trick effects* which mean faked, artificial intervention in denotation to construct false meanings.
2. *Pose* where the reader receives a simple denotation of a double-structured act (denoted-connoted) expressed in the pose, gaze, and hand position.
3. *Objects* - discontinuous and complete signifiers that apart of this they can derive association with cultural ideas.
4. *Photogenia* that stands for embellishing the connoted message of the image by techniques of lighting, exposure, and printing.'
5. *Aestheticism* that means the process when a photographer borrows methods or appropriates forms of the other art.
6. *Syntax* implies that a complex connotative meaning appears in a series of photographs united by one general idea in a sequence (Barthes & Sontag, 1982, pp.200-204).

For Barthes, the common domain of the signifiers of connotation is ideology, which can not but be single for a given society and history (1977, p.49). With the help of a visual semiotic analysis, I argue that national identity has ideological meanings portrayed in its visual representations in tourist advertising. The significations assigned through connotative non-verbal elements of the advertisements often present ideological meanings as idealistic.

The method of visual semiotics fits this research since it helps to identify "symbols" depicted in the tourist advertisements regarding Belarusian national identity which certainly involves reading between the lines and understanding the historical and cultural "baggage" of the nation in question. Moreover, researching meanings of the symbols with the help of denotative-connotative framework of the method would make it possible to trace cultural connotation assigned to the markers of cultural representation of national identity in the advertisements.

5 Analysis

In the following chapter of the thesis, I will structure the analysis of the materials in accordance with Hogan's (1999) conventions that represent the national identity markers in order to answer the research questions about markers of cultural representation that contribute to Belarusian national identity found in Belarusian tourist advertisements and their cultural connotation(s). Hogan's (1999) conventions are based on geography, leisure practices, cultural heritage, and social values. Using the method of visual semiotics and a mixed research method, I will first identify denotative meanings for the images in the materials selected for this study. Besides, I will also describe what is portrayed in the pictures that a reader not originally from Belarus would see in those ads without any subjective interpretation (denotative/direct meaning). Later, applying the ideas of visual semiotics, I will disclose the "hidden" information regarding culture, national history, values, and other symbols that constitute Belarusian national identity (connotative meaning). Connotations in this case come from the culture and are often easily recognized for those who grew up in it, which is Belarusian culture in this study.

5.1 Thematic analysis: public & private sector advertisements

5.1.1 Geography

National identity has ideological meanings portrayed in its visual representations in tourist advertising. One way through which national identity is evoked is geographical references. This convention highlights country's distinctive landscapes and landmarks, as well as flora and fauna typical of a country. Additionally, appeals to geography determine the mythology and ideology behind the landscapes and wildlife of a country demonstrating what meanings the nation ascribes to the nature reflecting the nation's understanding of themselves as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983).

In figure 1 taken from e-brochure "*Naydi Svoyu Belarus*" ("Find Your Belarus") a reader can see the map of Europe and the position of Belarus in it. It shows a general fact that Belarus is located in Eastern Europe with its borders clearly marked in the picture. However, not many readers will pay attention to how the globe is turned in this image, although it carries a symbolic message, as Barthes (1977) named it. If we look attentively, we can see that the map is turned in such a way that Belarus is portrayed among the countries from Western Europe. Belarus' eastern neighbour, Russia, is only partially depicted on the map and looks secondary in this case. So, in this implicit context we can see that Belarus is presented like a European country that is associating itself with the West rather than East, or at least wants to be perceived so. Just

as the geographical position and the emphasis on European location and western neighbours, it can be also interpreted that Belarus is a country that has many common features of Western Europe that might include history, shared culture, and legacy. Moreover, this image gives the impression that Belarusians and west Europeans are neighbours, hence, both have to promote friendship between each other. The same trend is also observed in a private advertisement (figure 26) where the territory of Belarus is shown in the centre, surrounded by the neighbouring countries, that means the republic is located at the crossroads of western and eastern Europe and is a unique place where East and West meet each other. Consequently, the geographical position and the way the state and private ads depict it stands for the idea of harmony (East and West), understanding, and friendship that constitute the national identity of Belarusians.

Quite a few advertisements I analysed for geographical references show a typical Belarusian landscape: interminable forests and lakes (figure 2). The country is landlocked, and the Belarusian landscape is characterized by a relatively flat and open landscape, the presence of swamps, forests, rivers, and lakes. Through the perspective of Barthes (1982) on symbolic messages, in figure 2 notions of wilderness are expressed through the vast and crowdless landscapes that imply solitude and tranquillity. The visual impression of the landscape is a vast green (in summer) or white (in winter) landscape, alternating with ribbons of rivers and dotted with sparkling lakes. There are approximately 20 thousand lakes in Belarus⁷, and for this reason, Belarusians call their country “blue-eyed”.

The landscape defines a certain type of flora and fauna in the country. Speaking about fauna, Belarus is home to a large number of wild animals and birds, many of which are rare species (about 76 vertebrates and 300 bird species)⁸. One of the most famous animals typical of Belarus is the European bison, or as Belarusians call it “*zubr*”. However, *zubr* has its largest populations in Poland, Belarus, Russia, and Germany respectively⁹. In figure 3 we see this wild animal in front of Belarusian landscape, *zubr* is a massive animal that became a symbol of Belarus, its character is also associated with Belarusian. The connotative meaning of this beast relates to wisdom and justice. *Zubr* never attacks first, but if one makes it angry, the bison enrages, and then no one can cope with it. It is nice to ascribe such qualities to oneself, considering the behaviour of the bison to be the standard of the Belarusian character. Belarusians also consider

⁷ For more information see <https://www.visit-belarus.com/en/nature-of-belarus/lakes-and-rivers/>. Accessed February 25, 2021.

⁸ For more information see <https://www.belarus.by/en/about-belarus/natural-history>. Accessed February 25, 2021.

⁹ For more information see https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/press-release/belarus-home-to-almost-25-of-worlds-european-bison-population_i_117930.html. Accessed January 29, 2021.

themselves as peaceful people, until injustice and violence provoke their rage as the world witnessed after the presidential elections in August 2020, which was the first massive dissatisfaction in the history of sovereign Belarus.

Apart from the bison, there is another symbol of wildlife important to Belarusians, the white stork (figure 4). The bird has long red legs and a long red pointed beak, which is a distinctive feature of this bird. The stork's typical habitat is a forest or a swamp that also makes up a traditional Belarusian landscape. This bird is another symbol of Belarus, it appears in popular beliefs as a reasonable creature with high moral qualities. The origins of this attitude of Belarusians to the stork go back to the legend of this bird, which was previously a human being punished for curiosity and turned into a stork by God. The fact that the bird returns to its old nest each year, gave rise to the tradition of considering the stork as the patron of the house, bringing harmony and prosperity to the inhabitants. The bird lives in pairs and shares the trouble of caring for the chicks. Hence, the stork is a symbol of devotion and parental love. Each Belarusian respects this bird and never destroys its nest, as they believe that the stork might revenge for that and burn the house. Just as the bison, the white stork embodies the national Belarusian traits such as wisdom, fidelity, peace, and justice.

The ads taken from the private sources add more understanding of the national character Belarusians possess by depicting some other animals typical of the republic. They are deer and elks (figures 27 and 28). The deer is an animal symbolizing beauty, grace, and good deeds. Besides, in Christian religion, a symbol of a deer is quite well-known. One of the towns in western Belarus, Grodno, has its official emblem depicting Saint Hubertus' Deer. St. Hubertus is a catholic saint, and therefore a western town in Belarus adopted his symbol as a town formerly belonging to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (16th-18th cc.). The deer, in itself symbolizing the love of freedom, nobility, grace, in the religious and mythological cult reflects the worship of nature¹⁰. So, the deer signifies the Christian origin of the Belarusians, their longing for freedom and moral self-improvement. Elk is another animal depicted in the private ads, but not shown in the state ones. This mammal looks big and calm, symbolizing strength, endurance, and dignity. Elk also serves as the personification of the ability to sweep away obstacles in its path. So, for the national identity, this animal is quite essential, as its image resembles the strength to overcome difficulties with dignity for a better future. This, for instance, could be observed in the heroic deed of the people

¹⁰ For more information see <https://geraldika.by/gerb-goroda-grodno/>. Accessed February 2, 2021.

from Belarus fighting in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), which happened concurrently with World War II, sacrificing lives for the peaceful future of their descendants. Occupied by Nazi Germany, Belarus became the country where the largest partisan movement in Europe developed. Therefore, the elk, an animal with stamina and perseverance, implicitly and explicitly embodies the core qualities of Belarusians reflected in world history.

Figure 5 demonstrates a plant that grows in the forest, it is called a fern. Barthes (1982) described connotation procedures used by photographers and editors to add meaning to their works. One of the aspects that causes a connotative meaning is a trick effect that stands for any faked, artificial intervention in the image. This plant never blossoms, but this image shows a flower (artificially created by the photo editors), which also refers to a symbolic message. According to the legend, on the night of *Ivan Kupala* (Belarusian name for Midsummer), the God of sky sends fire to the ground. From it, the fern flares up with a bright colour and it blooms for a while at midnight. Anyone who wanted to make his/her dreams come true and understand the language of animals and plants had to find the blooming fern¹¹. In this symbol, geographical reference goes along with the cultural heritage (legend). This symbol of a blooming plant reminds Belarusians of their unique legends, special nature and the legend of a fern flower also teaches the people to believe in the good.

Colour choice is also essential to the understanding of cultural meanings hidden in the tourism advertisements that carry valuable information, although implicit at first glance. Colour scheme and colour embellishing, according to Bathes (1982), are the essential elements of photogenia that highlight the connoted meaning. Colour meanings, however, differ from one culture to another, so while connoting the meaning Belarusians attribute to colours, I analysed it from East European perspective. In the images regarding the geographical references, one can see that green and blue are the frequent colours. Usually, green colour denotes life, harmony, and peace¹². Blue colour means innocence, peace, and devotion. As a rule, forests and lakes are the primary representatives of these two dominant colours in the reviewed advertisements.

The analysis of geographic category revealed that there are mainly four markers of cultural representation that serve to depict Belarusian national identity, such as forests, lakes, animals, and plants. This observation also supports the outcomes of Rohava's (2018) study on the national identity in Belarus, where most of the people interviewed identified themselves with

¹¹ For more information see <https://www.belarus.by/ru/travel/ethno-tourism/kupalle>. Accessed February 25, 2021.

¹² For more information see https://eriksen.com/marketing/color_culture/. Accessed February 25, 2021.

the country through the images of lakes, forests, and symbolic Belarusian animals. In terms of atmosphere and emotional connection, the endless skies and distant horizons generated by the vast expanses of the plain landscape evoke a sense of freedom and reflection looking at boundless open spaces. At the same time, Belarusian wildlife and countless forests inspire a sense of untouched wilderness. The abundance of lakes enhances the notion of authenticity and evokes a sense of calm and serenity.

The vast and emotionally inspiring landscape of Belarus is an integral part of its national character, which still has deep roots in its cultural heritage and nature, denoting a calm and thoughtful character of the local population. Moreover, the analysis of geographical appeals highlighted that the cultural connotations assigned to the significant non-verbal elements of the advertisements present ideological meanings as idealistic (for example, serenity and authenticity), which stands for the idea that nations always aim to portray their image as a positive and distinctive one.

5.1.2 Leisure practices

Popular sports usually describe a nation in term of its social values and relations. Moreover, it serves as a powerful tool of nation branding and its recognition all over the world. Dinnie (2016) argued that nation branding works internally by stressing the uniqueness of the country for its own citizens. So, I will analyse the unique social practices in leisure activities and the ways to interpret them in terms of Belarusian national identity. According to the advertisements I collected in my resources, the most popular sports to appear in the brochures and videos are ice hockey and running marathons (figures 6 and 7). In figure 6 we see that Belarusians are into ice hockey, they play it with international teams and hosted one Ice Hockey World Championship (held in 2014). Besides, it was originally planned to co-host another ice hockey world championship in 2021 but the International Ice Hockey Federation Council decided that due to safety and security issues it is impossible to co-host the championship in Minsk, Belarus¹³. In figure 7 the ad shows Minsk Arena, the main indoor arena in Belarus, which is a typical venue for ice hockey tournaments. Ice hockey is a team sport that usually gathers a lot of supporters. It unites people and appeals to collectivism and support, otherwise, no victory would be achieved. Hence, ice hockey advertisements propose the idea of collectiveness representing an imaginary community, that shares the concept of mutuality (Anderson, 1983). The same idea is

¹³ For more information see

https://www.iihf.com/en/events/2021/wm/news/24134/iihf_to_move_2021_world_championship. Accessed January 25, 2021.

expressed through the ideological meaning of running marathons as a popular sporting activity in Belarus. Just as ice hockey, it attracts a lot of people, not only as participants but also as supporters. The imagined community image of Belarusians is reinforced by the team sports and masses of people involved in them.

Hobbies as a part of leisure practices also carry an ideological representation in advertisements carrying a particular connotation to describe the distinctive features of national identity. Therefore, nations possess ideological meanings in their visual content portrayed in tourist advertisements. One of the common hobbies illustrated in these ads is birdwatching. As I have previously stated, Belarus has countless forests, and for this reason, it is easy to explain why birdwatching is popular there. In figure 8 there is a person standing in the forest and swamp watching the birds. The atmosphere in this image is calm, there is only nature and a human. Again, the colour scheme there is green and blue symbolising peace and tranquillity. Another popular hobby in Belarus is walking in the forests as it can be seen in figure 9. Through the perspective of Barthes (1982) on symbolic messages, we can observe in this photo such a significant connotative meaning hidden in the pose of the people. These are two young smiling people in the forest holding their hands while walking. The connotative meaning suggests that they symbolise youthfulness, happiness, romance, and unity.

One more component of the leisure practices convention is traditional leisure activities an imagined community share. One of such activities is fishing, which goes back in time to the ancient people. Figure 10, taken from video “Belarus. Beyond Expectations”, depicts a man who is fishing. In his hands he is holding a fish and smiling, which correspond with Barthes’ (1982) components of connotative meanings as pose and object. The object is this image (the fish) signifies that the people in Belarus remember the practices of their ancestors and are in close connection with the nature using its goods. The pose and facial expression of the man in the image testifies to the openness of the people and appreciation of the nature the country has.

Another traditional leisure activity in Belarus is “*khorovod*” (figure 11) that is usually performed at some traditional holidays such as Midsummer or ancient historical events. *Khorovod* is an ancient East Slavic dance originating from the pagan ritual of worshipping the god of the sun usually accompanied by singing¹⁴. The ideological meaning of this photo is

¹⁴ For more information see <https://www.rusclothing.com/blog/khorovod-folk-dance-of-russia/>. Accessed February 25, 2021.

observed in the participants of the khorovod- they are young, happy, and energetic that means that despite being calm and perhaps reserved, Belarusians can be joyful on special occasions.

The private tourism resources show the readers that another popular hobby among Belarusians are winter sports such as skiing and snowboarding. Belarus has several resorts that allow practising these sports, one of which is also shown in one of the ads (figure 29). The connoted meaning of these sports might mean that Belarusians are active people, who are aware of a healthy lifestyle. Besides, sports are the means of connecting people, many Belarusians unite in groups of those with whom they usually go snowboarding, skating, or skiing. These images also carry the ideological meaning where health and joy are the key factors. Besides, the lighting technique, or photogenia (Barthes, 1982), in these advertisements shows that winter is a sunny and pleasant time to be in Belarus, and the people in these images seem to enjoy their hobbies and the weather simultaneously.

Another interesting finding from the private advertisements is the abundance of images illustrating musical festivals in Belarus such as “*Viva Braslav*” and “*Rok za Bobrov*” (figures 30 and 31). The images show the leisure practices of Belarusians from a new perspective – appealing to the younger generation. All the festivals are held in the open air and aimed at young people who are fond of electronic and rock music. The images express the vibrant colours of summer and youth. Moreover, adolescence is usually associated with the summer, an implicit meaning according to the method of visual semiotics (Barthes, 1982).

Thus, in terms of leisure practices that are used to unite the people as a nation, I identified the following markers of cultural representation, such as sports (ice hockey, running marathons, winter sports), birdwatching, fishing, khorovod, and festivals. Such popular practices, which the people living in Belarus share, witness Guibernau’s (2007) dimensions of national identity, for instance, the cultural one. Leisure practices of Belarusians also depict that the nation has its culture expressed in the shared meanings contributing to the nation-building and authenticity (Hall, 1997) that are hobbies and popular sports in this case.

5.1.3 Cultural heritage

The cultural heritage component of Hogan’s (1999) classification of national identity representation is based on both cultural and historical dimensions of Guibernau’s (2007) theory on national identity aspects. It includes the unity of the people based on their common roots, traditions, practices, and famous representatives of a particular nation. These elements comprise

an imagined community of people that share similar “cultural baggage” derived from the past and being repeated in the present practices.

National ornament is considered to be a significant representative of a particular nation since its peculiar shape helps differentiate cultures from each other. All the public sources I analysed included the images of Belarusian ornament in their brochures and videos (figures 12 and 13). At first glance, we see peculiar figures that Belarusians typically have on their traditional costumes as some embroidery. But through the perspective of Barthes (1977) on symbolic messages, we observe in these images the notions of traditions and authenticity. Moreover, the colours of the ornament are done in the typical colours of Belarus - white and red. It is believed that white colour stands for innocence and purity, and red colour denotes courage and life. The colour scheme is the element of photogenia identified by Barthes (1982), with its primary goal to stress the connoted meaning. Hence, the national ornament of Belarus appeals to symbolize purity, peace, and life as the ultimate values that the community shares and what brings them together to be considered the nation. The national dress also goes along with the mentioning of national ornaments; therefore, the images of national costumes are also quite popular in the tourist advertisements to highlight the unique dresses and links to the past (figures 13 and 14). They are also done in the same colours as the ornaments, hence, intensifying the connotative meaning of the colours and stressing the importance of the connection with past experiences and saving the cultural heritage for the next generations to cultivate patriotism and self-identification with the Belarusian nation.

Interesting enough, all the people in the advertisements who wear the national dress are women. The ideological meaning behind that could be that Belarus is traditionally associated with a female image, as it is known that women’s traditional position is to preserve the heritage. Same as this, the country is also represented as a woman, and its citizens are her children. The female image also symbolizes care, traditions and “the heart of family” that serves as an aesthetic feature (Barthes, 1982) that connotes spirituality of the symbols. Alongside the traditional Belarusian dress, I noticed historical costumes in the tourist ads as well (figure 15). These costumes look western, and they were worn by the nobility in the times when Belarus was a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (13th-16th cc.) and later Poland (16th-18th cc.). This fact testifies that Belarus witnessed western influence before the Russian Empire took control of Belarusian territories and later gave Belarus a status of the republic when the USSR was formed. This also gives evidence to the complicated national identity of Belarusians, as it is two-faced (west vs. east), and it is the uneasy coexistence and the pendulum effect this causes (Ioffe,

2003). While analysing the private advertisements, I have noticed another interesting fact about the usage of historical costumes. In figure 32 we can see a man dressed like a Varangian (this is how ancient Slavic people called Vikings). Varangians were raiding the present territory of Belarus during the 8th-11th centuries¹⁵. By using the elements of the Nordic culture such as the image of a Viking ship in figure 33 and the costumes, the ideological meaning behind that is that Belarusians have a diverse origin, not only including the Baltic and Slavic ancestry, but Scandinavian too.

Famous people also represent cultural heritage of any country, as they contribute to its development and recognition. Belarus also has many well-known personalities that the people from there are proud of. In the governmental ads regarding tourism, I managed to find two of such. They are Saint Kirill of Turov (figure 16) and Francysk Skaryna (figure 17). Kirill of Turov (1130-1182) was a bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church who contributed to the Orthodox religion with his sacred writings. Francysk Skaryna (1470-1552) was the first book printer in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and in all Eastern Europe and the creator of the Belarusian literary language. The appearance of these personalities in the ads also testifies to the respect of the legacy the ancestors left to the Belarusians and the world. The governmental ads emphasized the famous people from the past centuries appealing to the rich historical heritage that the Belarusian nation offers the whole world.

Interesting enough, the private sources show us a totally different vision of remarkable personalities who come from Belarus or have Belarusian descent. Unlike the state ads that mention only medieval personalities, private advertisements focus on the present days by depicting such popular Belarusian sports people like Max Mirnyi (a former professional tennis player) and Darya Domracheva (a biathlete who won four gold medals in the Olympic Games) in figures 34 and 35. Besides, the private ads also mention Sviatlana Alexievich, a writer and journalist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015 and the only writer from Belarus to receive this award (figure 36). Special attention is also given to western celebrities with Belarusian ancestors, there is even a separate section in resource *YesBelarus* showing the famous people from Hollywood and other businesses whose grandparents migrated from Belarus in the 20th century. In the advertisements, we can see the images of Scarlett Johansson and Harrison Ford (figures 37 and 38). Mentioning famous personalities from the present times appeals to the younger generation as well as the older one. It also increases awareness of the

¹⁵ For more information see <https://www.belta.by/society/view/arheologi-dokazali-chto-na-territorii-belarusi-zhili-vikingi-136718-2010>. Accessed February 3, 2020.

achievements made by the Belarusians and their descendants and can also serve as a means of patriotic education.

Speaking about religion as a cultural heritage, Belarus is a country that has two official religions: orthodox and catholic. Nevertheless, Belarus is a tolerant country that respects other confessions as well. Public sector tourist ads (figures 18 and 19) provide its readers with an understanding of respect to religions that Belarusians share. A multifaith environment throughout Belarusian history has taught its people to appreciate different opinions and live peacefully together. Objects (in this case churches) carry the connotative meanings of traditions and history, the meeting point of the west and the east meet and the ways to co-exist with each other in this relatively small country.

Although the traditional food was not mentioned as an element of cultural heritage in Hogan's (1999) classification, I considered it to be important to be included in the cultural heritage element. National cuisine is a part of the heritage a particular nation shares, which dates back to the previous centuries and history. Figure 20 depicts typical national dishes in Belarus. The images show such popular dishes as *draniki* (potato pancakes), *verashaka* (thick meat sauce), and *khaladnik* (cold beetroot soup). This tradition, which includes a wide variety of local dishes, highlights the culinary creativity and pride in the local heritage that is widespread in Belarus. According to Barthes (1982), the objects in the images function as the inducers of associations that in this case are the associations of hospitality. Looking at the symbolic message that this image expresses, we can argue that Belarusians are hospitable people, who are ready to welcome guests and treat them to the local food.

Despite the fact that most of its cultural heritage comes from other regions, a strong sense of respect for tradition, pride in heritage permeates the life of Belarus. This is due to an emotional connection with a way of life ingrained in rural communities, where traditional customs, design and folklore are still respected. Therefore, Belarusian national identity is rooted in many different influences - both ancient and modern. Its Russian-European flavor, the ubiquitous influence of its cultural heritage in architecture, customs and way of life - all this gives Belarus a special flavor. Hence, we can see how Belarusian cultural heritage including its special ornaments, national dress, famous people, and religion is used as a tool for bonding. Thus, individuals imagine they have a shared community with the other people from the same territory (Anderson, 1983).

5.1.4 Social relationships and social values

Each nation possesses a set of common values and practices that keep people together. Such beliefs, values and social relationships are filled with meanings that groups allocate to them (Hall, 1997). Typical family relations are shown as an interaction of mother between her children (figures 12 and 21). As I have previously mentioned, the cultural heritage markers of national identity also concentrate on a female image that represented Motherland in that case. Here, the image of a woman, mother, represents the social values of the nation. In these advertisements, women are smiling and look happy to spend time with their children. The connotative meaning behind that shows traditional social values (such as loyalty, commitment, and care), a deep connection between mothers and their children, show mothers as bearers of traditions and family values. The female image also functions as an aesthetic feature (Barthes, 1982) that connotes spirituality.

Family is another mode of social relation being emphasized in the public tourist advertisements. For instance, the whole plot of the video “*Kulturno-poznavatelnyi turizm v Belarusi*” (“Cultural and Educational Tourism in Belarus”, figure 22) is dedicated to the story of a family travelling around Belarus. This sequence, or a story, corresponds to the syntax method mentioned by Barthes (1982). The syntax in the visual materials is the signifier of connotation when numerous images form a sequence together (in this case it is a video with one storyline). The family includes mother, father, and a child. In the video, we see a happy family that enjoys time together and spends it actively exploring Belarus. The connotative meaning of the family may symbolize traditions, love, and devotion. Private advertisements are also emphasizing the institute of family, its significance to Belarusians as the social biggest value (figure 39). This advertisement is of particular interest in this case, as it shows a newborn baby. The connotative meaning behind that could be that the country is a safe place to start a family, raise a child, and make them be the future of the country. So, the national identity here is expressed through the ideas of development, new hope, and future orientation.

I have already discussed Belarusian hospitality in brief that is conveyed with the help of national cuisine images in the advertisements. While analysing the ads that would denote social relationships, I came across the sequence of images (figures 23-25) with the workers from the customer service field in Belarus. In these snapshots from the video “*Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy*” (Belarus. Beyond expectations) made by the Agency for Tourism we can see smiling waiters and receptionists. Usually, the typical feedback a Belarusian gets from foreign visitors is that Belarusians look gloomy because they rarely smile. In contrast to this observation, the video

sequence shows smiling people welcoming a visitor. The pose and facial expressions of the workers in the images express openness and hospitality, two traits that Belarusians would typically use to describe themselves.

All in all, the markers of cultural representation that make up Belarusian national identity from the perspective of social values and relationships are the symbol of motherhood, family, and hospitality. The cultural connotations, in this case, are traditionality in terms of family values, devotion, and openness.

One interesting finding during the analysis of the ads from the private sector was the presence of Great Patriotic War related images. This war started with the Nazi invasion of the USSR in June 1941 and ended with a defeat of Nazi Germany in May 1945¹⁶. The war is remembered from generation to generation, Belarusians celebrate the Victory Day (May 9th) with the traditional parade, concerts, and fireworks in the evening. Figure 40 illustrates the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, while figure 41 shows a monument in Khatyn, a village where the entire population was massacred in March 1943 by the fascists. The following images depict the biggest loss among Belarussians in the 20th century, where a lot of human lives were lost, and many towns burned. Such images that remind the war is still causing feelings of sorrow, pride, and honour among Belarusians reminding they should keep united and live in peace with the neighbours as well as with far-abroad countries. The shared social values keeping Belarusians together are respect, memory, and patriotism from the perspective of the Great Patriotic War value to the people in Belarus. Although national identity is not clearly characterized with some ideological attachments, it is rooted in history, therefore, patriotism and national identity are interconnected here, with the shared history being one of the essential components of national identity (Guibernau, 2007).

Analysis of the private tourist advertisements has shown that many ads include images of the significant organizations from Belarus such as Wargaming, the creator of World of Tanks computer game with its 20 offices worldwide¹⁷, Viber, a popular messenger in the Russian-speaking countries developed by Belarusian IT-specialists¹⁸, and HTP Belarus (Hi-Tech Park), the leading IT cluster in Central and Eastern Europe¹⁹ (figures 42-44). Using these references to modern hi-tech businesses from Belarus or developed by Belarusians the advertisers try to

¹⁶ For more information see <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/great-patriotic-war/index.htm>. Accessed February 25, 2021.

¹⁷ For more information see <https://wargaming.com/en/about/>. Accessed February 4, 2021.

¹⁸ For more information see <https://vibir.ru/faq/komu-prinadlezhit-vajber>. Accessed February 4, 2021.

¹⁹ For more information see <https://www.park.by/en/htp/about/>. Accessed February 4, 2021.

appeal to the younger generation, awaken their sense of pride for the achievements their country has made and their wish to develop the local businesses, hence, cultivate a sense of belonging among the people, the wish to promote the country on the international arena. Besides, the ideological meaning behind the choice of these images is to show that Belarusian identity has such values as development, potential, innovation, and global recognition.

This analysis demonstrated that tourism marketing can provide the researchers with the data regarding the way the state imagines the nation, how cultural representation markers can be incorporated in the ads and be decoded for the purpose of national identity study. Hogan's (1999) classification utilized for this study's analysis can be described as leaning to the essentialist view on national identity since the categories which are served to describe national identity in her theory support this idea of national identity. For instance, her classification views national identity as based on kinship, ethnicity, and shared history that are reflected in geography, leisure practices, cultural heritage, and social relationships references. This classification does not involve any political or economic attachments that traditionally support the constructivist ideas. The predominant themes regarding the features of Belarusian national identity can be already traced upon the completion of the analysis. For instance, serenity, peacefulness, collectiveness, tolerance, endurance, and authenticity are the most visible cultural connotations that tourist advertisements ascribe to Belarusians and their national identity. The discussion chapter will thoroughly examine and interpret the results obtained during the empirical process of this study.

6 Discussion

6.1 Main markers of Belarusian cultural representation

To answer my research questions regarding the markers of cultural representation and their connotative meanings, I utilized Hogan's classification of conventions appealing to national identity through advertising. The markers of cultural representation were defined through the categories of geography, leisure practices, cultural heritage, and social relationships and values. The images corresponding to these appeals convey the symbols, values constructed by meaning producing practices representing the narrative of the nation (Hall & du Gay, 1996) which is manifested in the media and everyday culture by connecting stories, historical events, landscapes, national symbols, and rituals which represent shared values and experience.

Based on the appeals to *geography*, the analysis showed the following markers of cultural representation contributing to Belarusian national identity:

- Geographical location, meaning the advertisements that publish the map of Belarus surrounded by its neighbouring countries.
- Prominent Belarusian landscapes such as the big number of forests and lakes.
- Flora and fauna typical of the Republic of Belarus. The most typical animals depicted in the analysed advertisements were the European bison, stork, and deer. The fern is the most common plant that was found in the tourist advertisements.

The *leisure practices* are seen in these markers of cultural representation:

- Popular sports (ice hockey, running marathons).
- Hobbies, particularly birdwatching, music festivals, and winter sports.
- Traditional leisure activities including fishing, khorovods during folk holidays.

Belarusian *cultural heritage* is manifested through the images of:

- National ornament and dress.
- Historical costumes representing both Western and Eastern influence across the territory of contemporary Belarus.
- Religions practised in Belarus (Orthodoxy and Catholicism).
- Famous people (born in Belarus or born abroad with Belarusian background).
- Traditional Belarusian food (*draniki*, *kholodnik*, and *verashaka*).

The markers of cultural representation illustrating the appeal to social relationships and social values that reflect Belarusian national identity are the following:

- Woman and child images portraying motherhood.
- Family images.
- Images of customer service jobs in Belarus showing happy workers.
- Popular organizations from Belarus known worldwide (for example, Viber and Wargaming).

The above-mentioned appeals and the images depicting cultural representation contribute to Smith's (1983) definition of nation that describes nation as a community sharing a historic territory, historical memories, mass culture, common values, and duties. It can also be added that this definition is not complete, as the analysis showed that nation and national identity concepts stretch beyond the aforementioned categories and includes landscape, flora and fauna, popular hobbies and sports that the people share.

Each nation, or "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983), possesses a certain culture, a set of common values and practices that keep people together. Such beliefs, values and social practices are filled with cultural connotations the people attach to them. In this case, the nation act as semioticians, who are looking at the markers of cultural representation, interpret and make meaning out of them, hence, creating a picture of the nation, its values and distinctiveness. To achieve the goal and define what cultural connotations are given to the signs, objects, historical events, popular leisure activities, social relationships and so on, the study of semiotic interpretation of the data (Barthes, 1977) was utilized.

6.2 Cultural connotations and Belarusian national identity features

The analysis of the geographical component of the tourist ads demonstrated the following cultural connotations describing the national identity of Belarusians. The analysed images of the maps of Belarus revealed an important attitude of Belarusians to their place in the world. By showing the geographical location of the republic among the western European countries, Belarus means it strives to be European, be a partner and an equal to the EU countries. Meanwhile, the eastern border on these maps shows a part of Russia, denoting that as neighbours, Belarusians need to be in balance with both east and west. The actual geographical location of Belarus has made the people from there understand the value of partnership, but it is not an easy co-existence of west and east across Belarusian borders, and still, the necessary steps towards building up effective partnership must be made in the nearest future, especially

during the current turmoil in the republic. Therefore, the cultural connotation of the maps in the tourist advertisements expresses that Belarusians as a nation are willing to be partners and promote friendship among the surrounding countries and live in harmony and peace with them.

The landscape (the abundance of lakes, rivers, and forests) depicted in the advertisements and the prevailing colours of nature in Belarus give the idea of the ways of life in the republic, that seeks peace, harmony, and devotion. This testifies to the fact that Belarusians have never started a war on their own initiative, they live between west and east, and are taught to appreciate what they have since childhood. Symbolic Belarusian animals also serve as good examples of the features appreciated in the people living in Belarus and which Belarusians associate themselves with. As such, the *zubr* depicts a strong feeling for justice which has been seen immediately after the President elections in Belarus in 2020 and resulted in rallies and several innocent deaths of the participants, which caused dissatisfaction with a lot of the people in Belarus and made them participate in civil activism with more enthusiasm than before. The images of the white stork, the national bird, connote wisdom, justice, and fidelity, hence, reaffirming the national identity with these characteristics. The elk, another common animal in Belarus, embodies the idea of strength and dignity that also helps Belarusians struggle for peaceful and fair future for themselves.

Leisure practices also give a lot of insights into the values uniting a nation. The analysed tourist advertisements showed that Belarusians as a nation practice a few free time activities all year round. The images of team sports (for instance, ice hockey) testify to the fact that Belarusians are ready for partnerships, they have stamina. At the same time, individual sports (marathons, skiing) describe Belarusians as an individualistic community. The hobbies that are depicted in the selected advertisements appeal to youthfulness, happiness, respect for traditions, appreciation of the nature. The people depicted in such ads promoting leisure activities in Belarus are in most cases young connoting the meaning of a young country that became independent 29 years ago.

The data used to analyse appeals to national identity from the perspective of cultural heritage in Belarus provided some new outcomes. These are the typical colours of the national Belarusian ornament, white and red, that denote peace, courage, and life. These characteristics rightfully describe the nation, as Belarusians participated in the Great Patriotic War, and lost almost the half of their population there. Besides, the courage unites Belarusians even nowadays to resist the political regime, look for peaceful solutions, and hope for the changes to come.

Another interesting observation was made while analysing the historical costumes illustrated in the images and videos which show a rich heritage of Belarus that comes from Nordic and west European countries. It means that Belarus as a nation is not similar to the Russians, as the territory of Belarus was inhabited by many other people who mingled with the local population and gave Belarus its unique combination of traditions. One more cultural connotation revealed while doing the analysis is Belarusian legacy made by the famous people from there. This finding shows that the country has many talented people who were either working in their home country or the descendants of Belarusians who are now recognized all over the world. The images of denoting places of worship in Belarus the multireligious atmosphere in the country, that also describes nation's tolerance for different opinions and customs, this is also reflected in the fact that Belarus celebrates Christmas twice – first on December 25 and second on January 7. Hospitality and distinctiveness of Belarusian national identity is also manifested through its national cuisine with own specialties influenced by the meeting point of western and Russian traditions.

The tourist advertisements reflecting the national identity features through the social relationships and values connotations highlight the role of motherhood in Belarusian society, relating it to such characteristics as loyalty, commitment, and love. Alongside with the topic of motherhood the image of family was quite repetitive in the tourist advertisements that connotes tradition, love, and devotion. All these cultural connotations ascribed to motherhood and family can be transferred to the country, what feelings should arise while talking about the motherland. In this way, the national identity of Belarusians is also manifested through the patriotic feelings for the motherland. Besides, the images of babies in the advertisements mean new life, development, and future orientation. At the same time, such images influence the idea that as a nation, Belarusians should stay in the country and start families there for the purpose of the growing and developing country. The big number of the smiling workers from the customer service sphere emphasize the hospitable character of the nation, its friendly attitude towards the locals as well as the foreign visitors.

While analysing the markers of cultural representation contributing to Belarusian national identity in governmental and private tourist advertisements, some interesting differences in its representation were identified. First, in the private advertisements many images contained references to the Nordic nature and history. For instance, these were the images of elks and deer – typical animals of the North, winter sports activities, and the elements of Nordic culture – Varangians and Viking ships. All these elements might be a reference to Scandinavian countries

and that Belarus is not too far from them. Belarus has relatively the same climate, fauna, and nature, which the private companies are willing to highlight for its readers. This emphasis on the ties with Scandinavia also creates the idea of happiness, economic development, and democracy – the features typically attributed to the Nordic region. In this manner, the tourist advertisements reinforce Belarusian national identity in the way that Belarusians as a nation can achieve the same success as the Nordic countries, as they have many common features.

During the process of analysing the images of famous Belarusians depicted in governmental and private advertisements, I noticed that governmentally approved tourist advertisements illustrate famous personalities from the old times, while the private companies publish images of modern significant Belarusians as well as celebrities abroad that have Belarusian background. Hence, private advertisements appeal to a modern image of Belarus, that the national identity of Belarusians is not only based on a shared past but on a shared present and future too.

Another difference between the sources of advertisements is the mentioning of modern achievements and famous organizations from Belarus that is mentioned only in the selected private sources of this research. Just as the previous observation, this difference also highlights the future orientation and global recognition of Belarus. The references to the famous Belarusian businesses within the country and abroad may stimulate the feeling of pride for belonging to Belarusian nation and increase a feeling of belonging to the nation.

A curious finding was that the Great Patriotic War was mentioned only in the private advertisements. Usually, the government and state institutions include references to this war regarding Belarus, its past and future, which was not in the case of this study. Only the selected private sources used images that would remind a Belarusian reader the war. I suppose that this depends on the choice of data, and in the governmental data selected for this study there appeared no references of the Great Patriotic War.

6.3 The complex nature of Belarusian national identity

Figuring out what cultural connotations to use in relation to Belarus as a tourist destination depends not only on the global tourist market but on how a state wants to be perceived by the nation internally and the global audience externally creating the nation branding. The analysis of the cultural connotations in the tourist advertisements of Belarus showed that Belarusians possess rather complex national identity, which is manifested in the feeling of belief to the same nation and sharing the qualities that differ them from other nations. The complex nature of the

national Belarusian identity can be analysed through the dimensions mentioned by Guibernau (2007) and Anholt (2007), which are reflected in the advertisements and are used for the purpose of nation branding among the local population. The cultural dimension is seen throughout the images portraying the customs, national costume, famous personalities that contribute to the formation of the collective sense of belonging to one nation. Besides, the images of historical costumes, some sites related to the history create the historical dimension of the national identity that was also indicated during the analysis for this study. The territorial dimension can be found in the pictures of the maps showing the geographical location of Belarus that make the community understand their connection with each other that is based on the fact of their living in the same area. Linguistic and cultural adaptation of the population contribute to the political dimension of the national identity, which is not explicit in the analysed advertisements, but is seen in the facts that the republic has its two state languages, Russian and Belarusian, the established state structure, and recognition of its independence. The most common cultural meanings contributing to the understanding of Belarusian national identity acquired from the data analysis using the methodology of visual semiotics are peace, endurance, collectiveness, hospitality, tolerance, authenticity, and future orientation. These meanings embody the idea of imagined community for the internal audience reaffirming common values and provide a sense of belonging among the people of the country.

The results of this study fit Rohava's (2018) research on Belarusian national identity in an autocratic state in the way that this study described Belarusian national identity manifestation in geographical identification with the land, national customs, values, and everyday practices. Just as the interviewees in Rohava's study, the analysed advertisements show that the markers of Belarusian cultural representation do not possess political connotations. The governmentally controlled advertisements managed to integrate cultural, historic, and geographic representations in the content of the ads avoiding any reference to the politics but rather giving emphasis on the unique customs, fauna, sport activities, and influential people from Belarus. Besides, this study also supports the idea that Belarusian national identity is deeply related to the land (nature and landscape), qualities of the people from Belarus (for instance, tolerance), ethnic ornaments, historical figures, new Belarusian businesses in IT sector, success in sports, and the famous Belarusian athletes. This study also completes the previous research on Belarusian identity with the references to the Great Patriotic War acknowledging the role of Belarusian people in World War II. This can be the result of the state discourse of the war and the cultivated perception of Belarusian national identity with the sacrifice of the Belarusian

people and their heroism during the war. This narrative can be viewed as a part of political dimension of the national identity described by Guibernau (2007) where the state is developing the ideas of the unity of the nation and its shared destiny.

This study also supports Ioffe's (2003) research highlighting the Janus-faced national identity of Belarusians split between Westernisers and the people with pro-Russian orientation reflecting in the republic's long history being a part of both sides in the certain time periods. The evidence for this is traced in tourist advertisements depicting cultural connotations originating from both East and West, the coexistence of these sides in one small country. Although Ioffe stresses that because of these two struggling sides, Belarusian people suffer from apathy and cultural confusion, this study suggests that nowadays in spite of the political and civil tensions within the republic, people start to realize who they are and what differs Belarusians from Russia and the idea of "Russian World" concept. Besides, the data used for this study reflect the current views on what "Belarusian" is from the point of view of both state and private actors, where the emphasis on either of the sides (western or pro-Russian) is downplayed and is shown as a balance between these two cultures that Belarusians maintain.

6.4 Language issues and political nation-building in Belarusian tourist advertisements

During the analysis, I also paid attention to the language of the sources chosen for this study. Even though the language was not the main object of this research, it is still a component of national identity. The selected resources showed that the position of Belarusian language is still in decline, as the state-funded advertisements from the brochures are not published in Belarusian. Although, the publisher, Belarusian National Agency for Tourism, has its official page in both Russian and Belarusian. Nevertheless, the Belarusian version of this page has a limited content in comparison with its Russian counterpart. For instance, the news section of the Belarusian page has not been updated since 2019. A remarkable observation is that the private resource "YesBelarus" has its official webpage in both official languages and the size of content is the same, all the versions are updated. This observation also reinforces the idea that the unifying elements of Belarusian national identity are landscape, shared memories, cultural heritage, and social practices rather than language as the most important in defining national identity in Belarus. A lot of Belarusians have adopted Russian as their primary language due to historical and political reasons, but it does not necessarily mean that Russian speakers outside Russia will be willing to associate themselves with the "Russian World" concept. For this reason, Belarusian tourist advertisements emphasize the idea of the unique Belarusian character despite a shared language by showing that Belarusians as a nation have

incorporated the legacy of both East and West reflected in the cultural heritage segment most of all.

Nation-building highly depends on national identity, the ideas represented in its national culture, and discourses that reach the minds of this imaginary community. Apart from the systems of cultural representations, Hall (1996) mentions nations as political formations too. In the case of Belarus, the people have a basic feature describing them as the subjects of a particular political formation such as citizenship. As it was stated in Rohava's (2018) and Smok's (2013) study, Belarusians tend to limit their belongingness to a geographical identification with the land but resist ideologically charged discourses related to Belarusian national identity because of the split national identity under the autocratic regime. Speaking about political nation-building and constructivist views on the idea of national identity in the tourist advertisements, it is not clearly visible there. During the definition of cultural connotations in tourist ads, it was difficult to define political connotations that might have been included in them. The absence of explicit political nation-building in this case may testify to the fact that Belarus can be characterized as informational autocracy (Guriev & Treisman, 2020) where mass media is an important tool in legitimizing the authority/propaganda. The analysis in this study demonstrated coherence between state and private media, as there are no significant differences between the markers of cultural representation contributing to Belarusian national identity as well as the cultural connotations given to them. This fact can also be attributed to informational autocracy where the existence of private media can be considered nominal as they may be bribed or censored easily. However, elements of patriotism, a strong devotion to one's country and support for its policy, can be traced in the selected advertisements in this study. The images of the museum of Great Patriotic War and war monuments (figure 40 and 41) portray the most tragic and the most heroic episode in Belarusian history as a part of the USSR. Belarus had great human losses in that war, and the constant reminder of that nowadays in media, education, and national holidays serves as a strong tool for spreading patriotism. Although the war ended almost 76 years ago, the state is continuing nowadays to use it as the main means to cultivate patriotism among Belarusians due to the nostalgia for the Soviet period the Belarusian government is experiencing. Other symbols of patriotism (national insignia) appear in the images illustrating sport in Belarus, for example sportspeople wearing sports uniform with the Belarusian coat of arms and in red and green colours – the colours of the official flag (figure 6). Besides, the advertisements also show famous sports people holding Belarusian flag, indicating victory and patriotism, as in the figure

34 with Max Mirnyi, famous Belarusian tennis player. These symbolic representations of the flag and coat of arms disseminated into media production with the help of the Belarusian government that has worked at nation branding incorporating additional cultural representations and the image of sports and renowned Belarusian sportspeople. This appearance of patriotism in media finds approval among most of the people in Belarus because it is not directly connected to political narratives of the state.

All in all, the cultural connotations found in these tourist advertisements highlight that Belarus has its own heritage (historical and cultural), social practices, and values – all the conventions that represent national identity according to Hogan (1999). These advertisements possess certain symbols and meanings familiar to each Belarusian born and raised in the republic, which testifies to the fact that the collective identity of Belarusians exists, it has its own peculiarities and uniqueness manifested in the mass media and nation branding through tourist advertisements. The way in which the advertisements represent the nation promotes a distinct understanding of the prominent features of citizens, which leads to the representation of the nation in a particular way. Belarusian tourism advertisements become means of branding since they affirm certain Belarusian values such as, for instance, peace, serenity, harmony, tradition, and courage. The branding done on the level of advertisements provides a sense of belonging among the members of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983), attracts people of the country to join the shared effort of building the image of the nation and its identity.

7 Conclusion

Referring to the title of this thesis, “Terra Incognita in the Heart of Europe”, a slogan that the Agency for Tourism of Belarus used to promote the republic at international exhibitions, the aim of this study was to examine the hidden elements comprising Belarusian national identity. Belarus is the country that many people have heard about but mostly in a political context regarding its regime. Due to the recent events following the 2020 Presidential elections, a lot of people heard of Belarus and the tensions rising within the country regarding the election’s transparency and fairness. These events highlighted the will of Belarusians to get back to and analyse their national identity as well as to seek for spiritual and symbolic sources to withstand the current civil turmoil. During the analysis for the study, it was demonstrated that the national identity unites the community based on a sense of belonging to the same state, sharing the same culture, social practices within daily life, and the meanings the people ascribe to objects and habits.

The existing research gap in the research on Belarusian national identity provided a ground for this study by utilizing a comprehensive visual semiotics analysis. This study supports and extends the academic research on the topic regarding the symbols of Belarus and their meanings to Belarussians, the influence of the national language on the formation of national identity, and the complex/borderland national identity of Belarusians.

The tourism advertisements utilized in this thesis shed light on how Belarus presents the nation to its internal audience. They have portrayed the abundance of cultural representation markers contributing to Belarusian national identity and multiple cultural connotations assigned to them. This study demonstrated the complex nature of Belarusian national identity highlighting its borderland essence where western and eastern political views, historical memories, and social values collide, although such a conflict is not explicit in the advertisements but rather portrayed as a harmony of the two opposites. Due to the increasing political nation building from the government, the emphasis in the analysed advertisements is mostly put on the universal values of Belarusians as a nation with the main categories such as history, culture, landscape, and social duties. The complex nature of Belarusian identity shows itself in the tourist advertisements that depict elements of western and eastern cultures coexisting within one small country, the priority of harmony, traditions, and stamina. Such a narrative can be shared by both sides nowadays, the government-supporting and pro-opposition citizens. In this way, the advertisements (public and private) strive to show the interpretations of Belarusian national

identity that every Belarusian would find relevant, emphasizing the positive nature of the nation that would contribute to the country branding on the whole.

The differences found during the comparison of public and private tourist advertisements were proved to be not as extreme as it was anticipated during the time of preparatory work while reading the relevant literature and considering the suitable research methodology. It showed that both public and private sources follow the same pattern of Belarussian national representation with one major difference between them – the private sources usually demonstrate culture representation features more appealing to the younger generation. This observation suggests that the private tourist advertisements are trying to be up to date and follow all the current changes in the society.

The mixed methodology method was efficient in the following study, as it contributed to the completeness, credibility, illustration, and enhancement of the research. The use of qualitative data supported quantitative findings and reinforced the integrity of findings since the study on national identity is a versatile topic that includes a big number of representative elements. For such a visual industry as tourism, visual semiotics analysis was chosen to analyse the representations of Belarusian national identity. This analysis helped to identify denotative and connotative meanings of the objects depicted in the images and, hence, achieve the aim of the study and answer its research questions. To be able to carry out this analysis, I relied on my “cultural baggage” of a person who has lived in Belarus for 25 years, which allowed me to identify the most significant symbols and objects familiar and important to a Belarusian. Moreover, to stay credible in this study, I consulted many online resources from Belarus that provide cultural connotations to the most popular national symbols of Belarus.

Speaking about the limitations of the methodology, the image, as a non-verbal source of communication, is usually open to many interpretations. Connotative meanings require a viewer to make sense of the visual side, explain it from the point of view of the implicit context there. For this reason, images might have multiple meanings. Taking this obstacle into account, I consulted several sources to provide credible connotations for the visual content. Moreover, I had to keep in mind that cultural connotations may be working in many ways and that there is no universal truth in their interpretation. Overall, the visual semiotics method proved to be effective as it allows to provide cultural connotations and connect them to the features of national identity, analyse them, and draw conclusions.

The results of this study can be applied in international marketing as well as in ethnographic research. The outcomes may help ethnographers obtain useful data regarding the culture and values of the Belarusians, while marketing specialists in the tourism sphere, for instance, could develop their strategies regarding the development of nation brand and tourism industry in Belarus. These data can also be used in marketing specialists' training, equipping them with the knowledge on how to promote tourism by highlighting the national identity and attract both domestic and foreign customers. But the most practical implication of this research is in the nation-building processes in Belarus. The results formulated in this study can help unite the people, realize the nation's distinctiveness from its neighbours and work on political strategies beneficial to Belarus as an independent and democratic state in future.

As for the future research suggestions, the following study can be reinforced with the examination of the verbal communication in Belarusian tourist advertisements (for example, slogans and titles) to check how the texts in these advertisements address Belarusian national identity and what stylistic devices appear in these texts to characterize Belarusians as a nation. This research suggestion may reinforce the following study of the visual side of tourist advertisements so that a full picture of visual and non-visual communication could be analysed and put into practice. Besides, the role of the Belarusian language in advertising should be studied in more detail to see how widespread the language use is there, its linguistic features, and the opinion of Belarusians about the use of their native language in media on the whole, including its relevance and purpose(s).

All in all, this study demonstrated what markers of cultural representation are used in the tourist advertisements of Belarus, the way they speak to the citizens, and shape the national identity. However, recent civil protests, and the increasing response from the government resulting in purges of the state employees and propaganda through mass media suggest that changes in Belarusian advertising might happen in future. There are two possible scenarios of how this change would develop, and it is still unclear which way would take over. Tourist advertisements can become either extremely politicized to "calm down" the oppositional-minded Belarusians or they would reflect the free and modern Belarus and the nation. Such changes will depend on the future development of the conflict within the state and the possibilities of a dialogue between the government and the opposition in exile.

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Appendix A

Public Advertisements



Figure 1. The map of Belarus. From *Naydi svoyu Belarus [Find your Belarus]*. National Tourism Agency. (2019). Retrieved from [https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81\[1\].pdf](https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81[1].pdf). Accessed March 23, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 2. Belarusian landscape. From *Naydi svoyu Belarus [Find your Belarus]*. National Tourism Agency. (2019). Retrieved from [https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81\[1\].pdf](https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81[1].pdf). Accessed March 23, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 3. European bison in the Belarusian forest. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy [Belarus. Beyond expectations]* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 4. The stork. From *Naydi svoyu Belarus [Find your Belarus]*. National Tourism Agency. (2019). Retrieved from [https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81\[1\].pdf](https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81[1].pdf). Accessed March 23, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 5. Fern flower. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy* [Belarus. Beyond expectations] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzlj6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 6. Sport in Belarus. From *From Naydi svoyu Belarus* [Find your Belarus]. National Tourism Agency. (2019). Retrieved from [https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81\[1\].pdf](https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81[1].pdf). Accessed March 23, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 7. Minsk Arena. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy [Belarus. Beyond expectations]* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 8. Birdwatching as a leisure activity. From *Ekologicheskij turizm v Belarusi [Ecotourism in Belarus]*. National Tourism Agency. (2019). Retrieved from [https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/Ecotourism_A5_RUS-web\[1\].pdf](https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/Ecotourism_A5_RUS-web[1].pdf). Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 9. Active lifestyle in Belarus. From *Ekologicheskiy turizm v Belarusi [Ecotourism in Belarus]*. National Tourism Agency. (2019). Retrieved from [https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/Ecotourism_A5_RUS-web\[1\].pdf](https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/Ecotourism_A5_RUS-web[1].pdf). Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

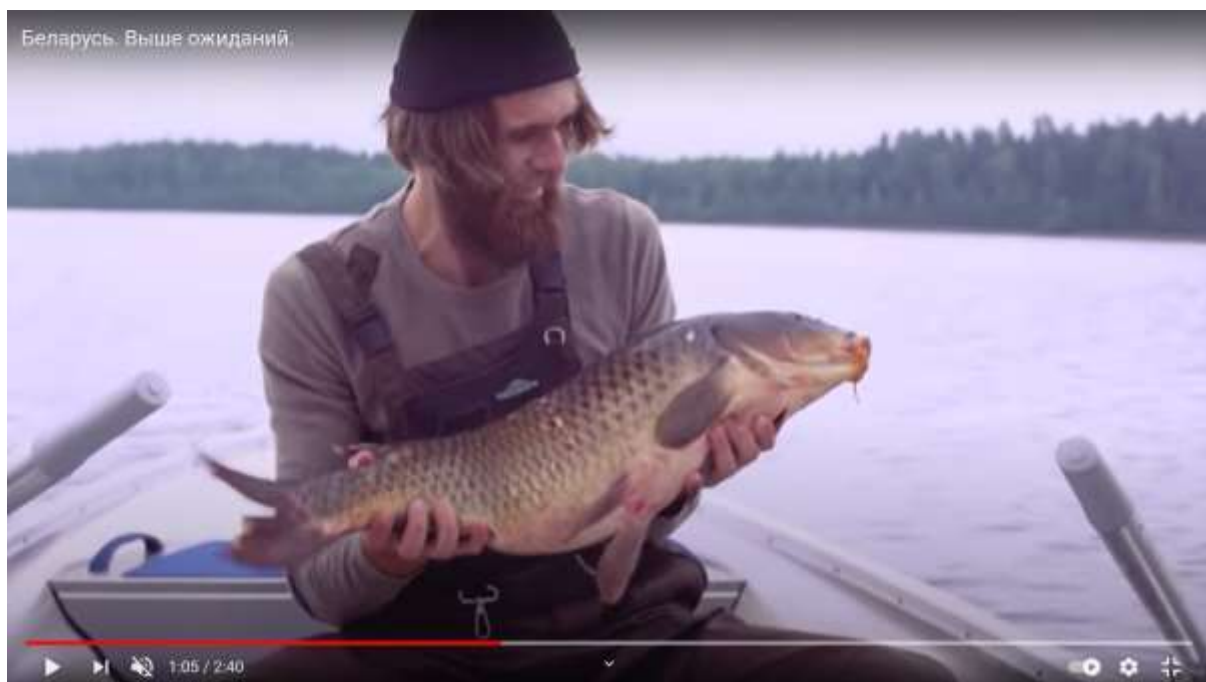


Figure 10. Fishing is a popular leisure activity in Belarus. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy [Belarus. Beyond expectations]* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 11. *Khorovod*. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy* [Belarus. Beyond expectations] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 12. Belarusian traditional ornament. From *Promyshelnniy turizm v Belarusi* [Industrial tourism in Belarus]. National Tourism Agency. (2019). Retrieved from [https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/Prom-tourism_A5_RUS-web\[1\].pdf](https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/Prom-tourism_A5_RUS-web[1].pdf). Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

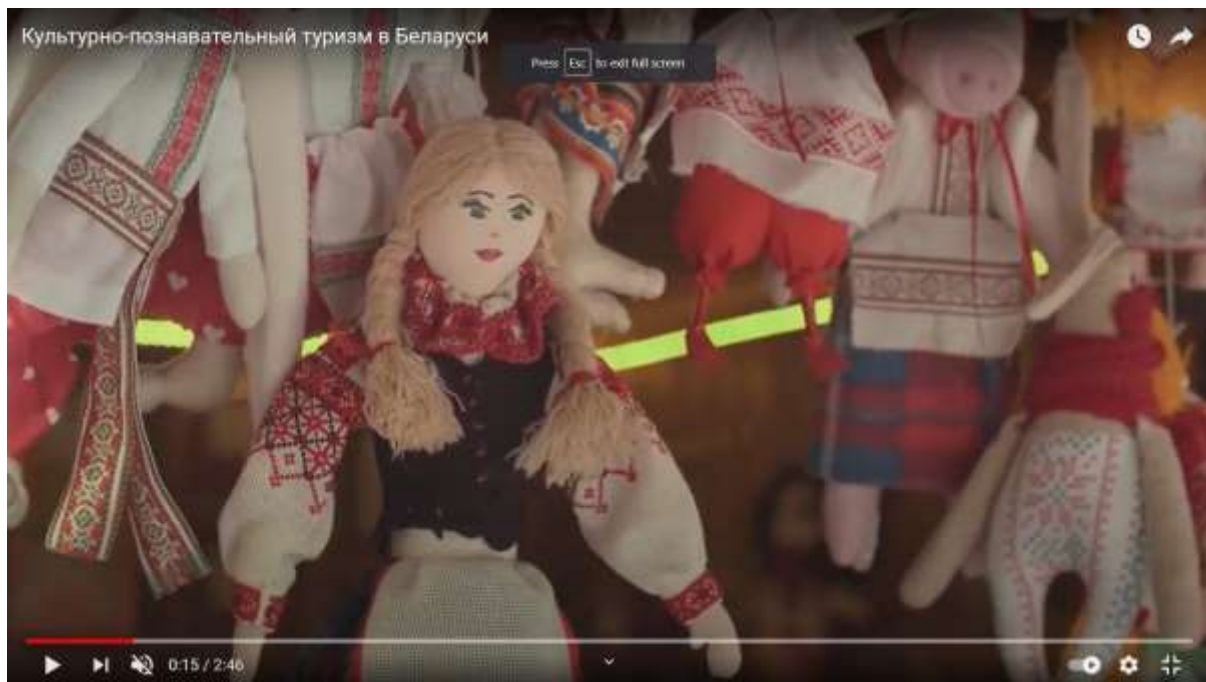


Figure 13. Traditional Belarusian dress. From National Tourism Agency. (2020, April 20). *Kulturno-poznavatelnyi turizm v Belarusi* [Cultural and educational tourism in Belarus] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/yyznEfEpCRY>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 14. Traditional Belarusian dress. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy* [Belarus. Beyond expectations] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 15. People dressed in Polish nobility's dress._From National Tourism Agency. (2020, April 20). *Kulturno-poznavatelnyi turizm v Belarusi* [Cultural and educational tourism in Belarus] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/yyznEfEpCRY>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

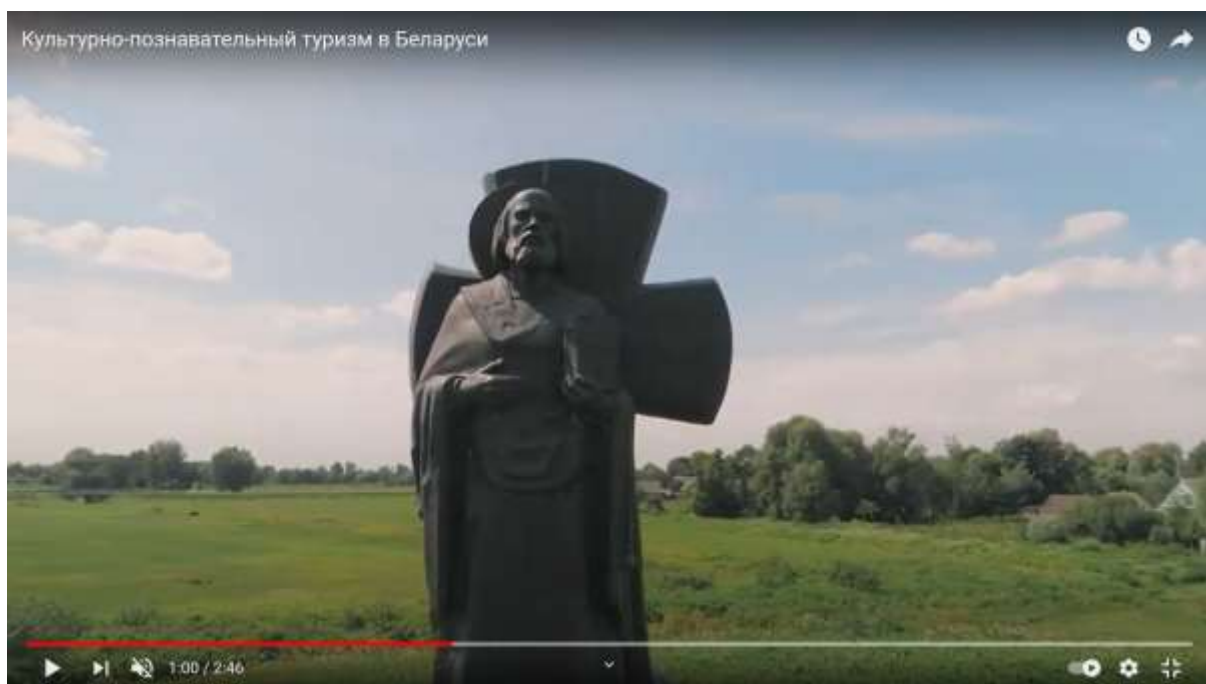


Figure 16. Kirill of Turov._From National Tourism Agency. (2020, April 20). *Kulturno-poznavatelnyi turizm v Belarusi* [Cultural and educational tourism in Belarus] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/yyznEfEpCRY>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 17. Francysk Skaryna. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy* [Belarus. Beyond expectations] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

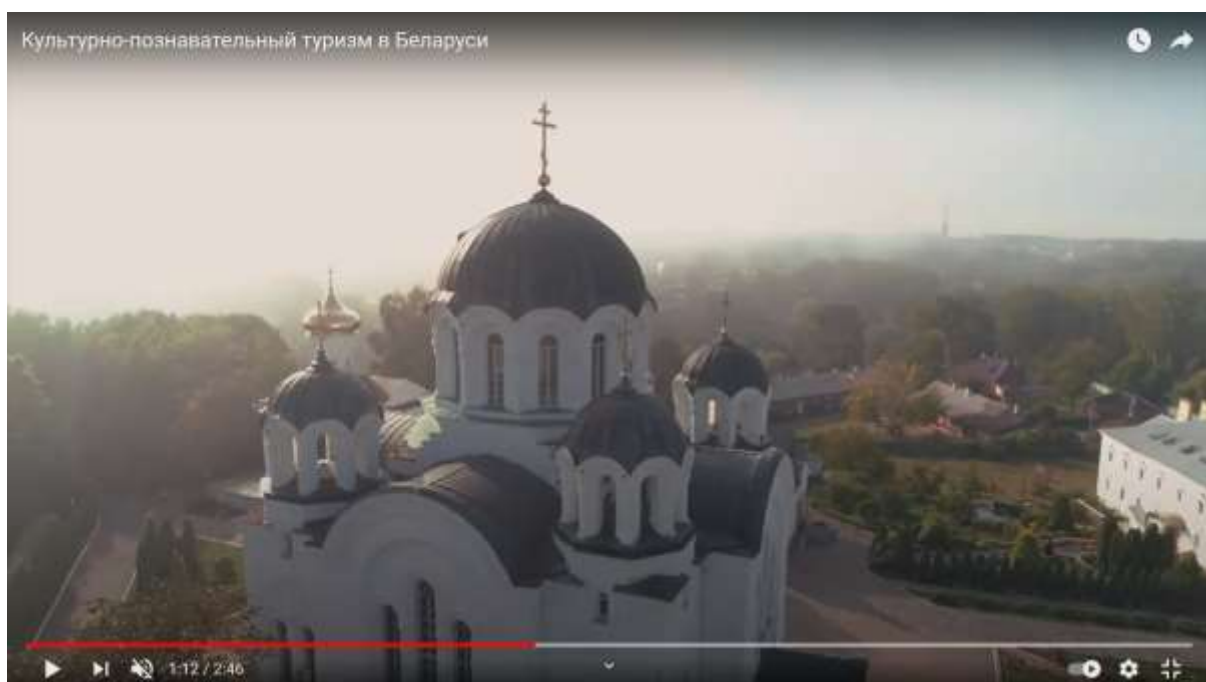


Figure 18. An orthodox church in Belarus. From National Tourism Agency. (2020, April 20). *Kulturno-poznavatelnyi turizm v Belarusi* [Cultural and educational tourism in Belarus] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/yyznEfEpCRY>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

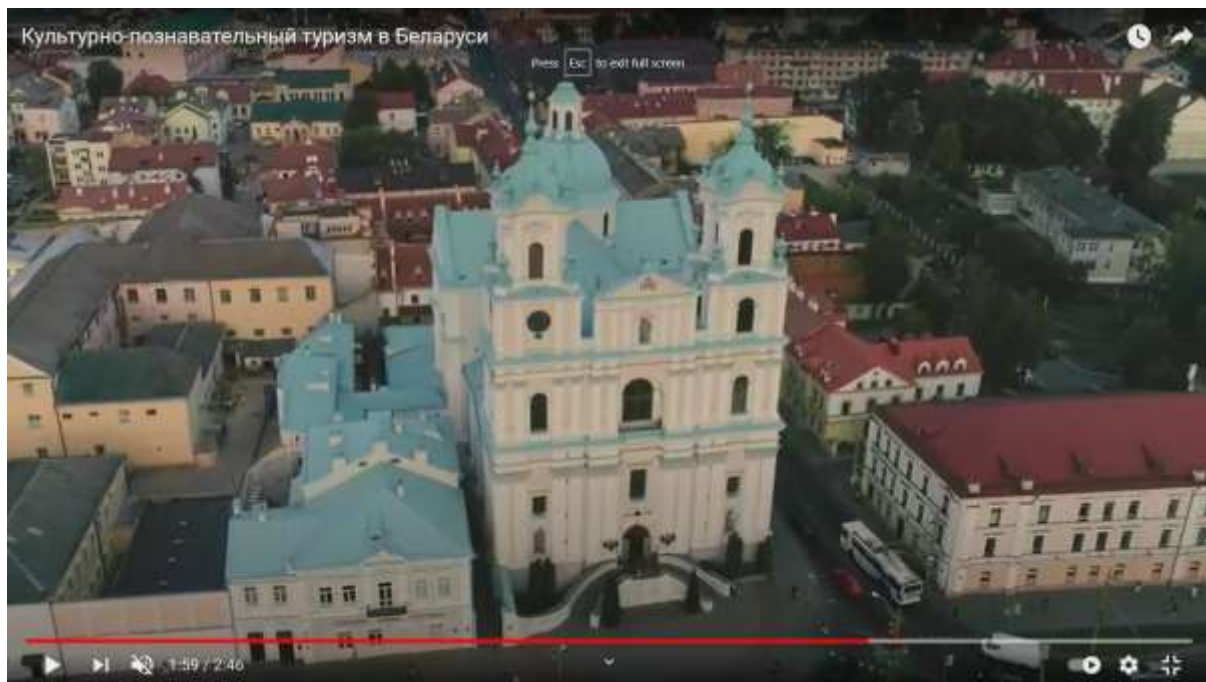


Figure 19. A catholic church in Belarus. From National Tourism Agency. (2020, April 20). *Kulturno-poznavatelnyi turizm v Belarusi* [Cultural and educational tourism in Belarus] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/yyznEfEpCRY>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 20. Belarusian national cuisine. From *From Naydi svoyu Belarus* [Find your Belarus]. National Tourism Agency. (2019). Retrieved from [https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81\[1\].pdf](https://www.belarustourism.by/uslugi/%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%91_%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81[1].pdf). Accessed March 23, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 21. Mother and children. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy* [*Belarus. Beyond expectations*] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 22. Belarusian family. From National Tourism Agency. (2020, April 20). *Kulturno-poznavatelnyi turizm v Belarusi* [*Cultural and educational tourism in Belarus*] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/yyznEfEpCRY>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 23. Waiters. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy* [*Belarus. Beyond expectations*] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

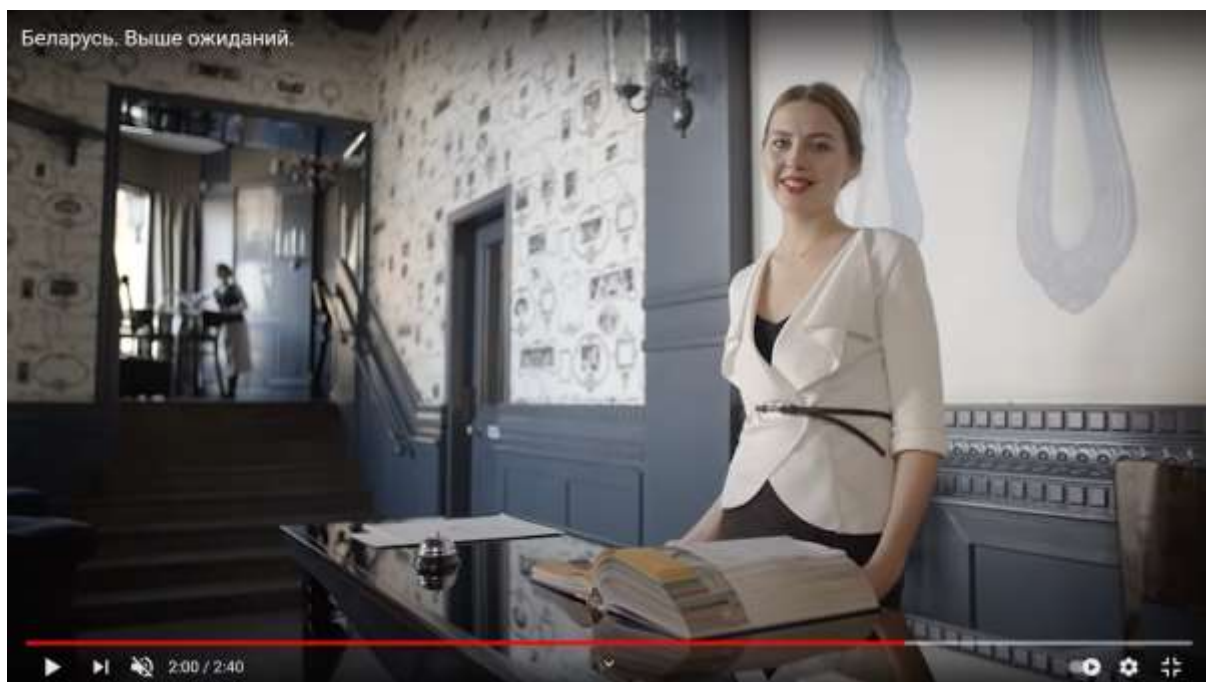


Figure 24. Receptionist. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy* [*Belarus. Beyond expectations*] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

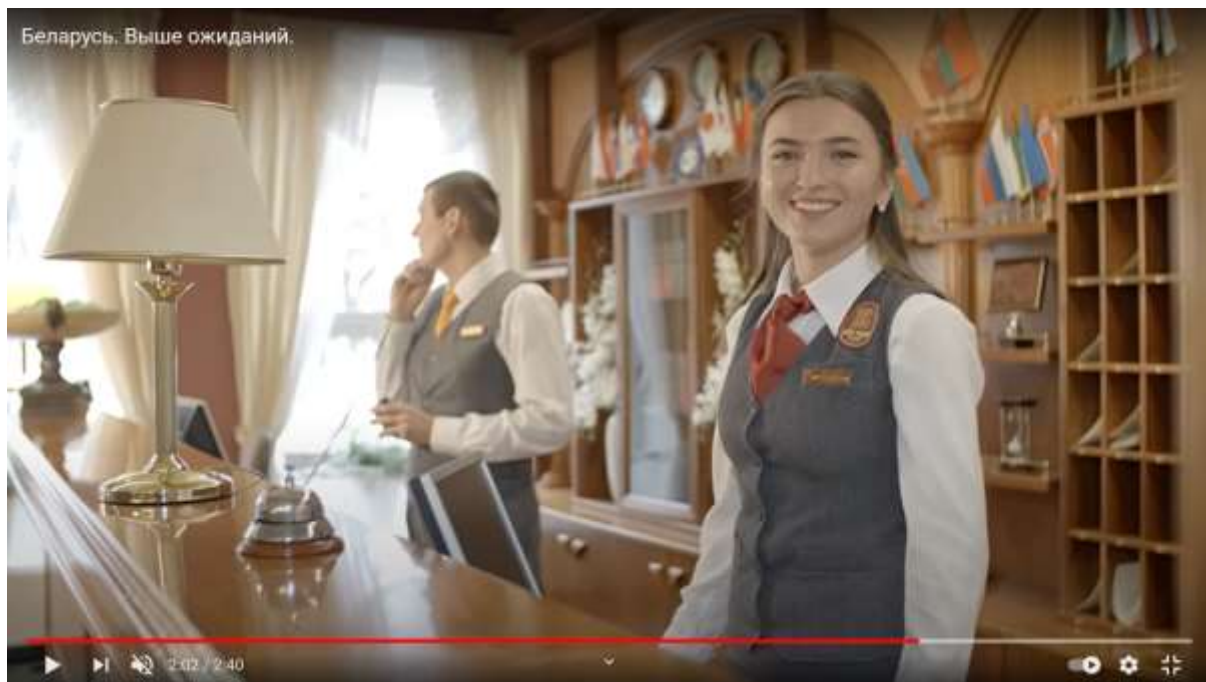


Figure 25. Receptionists. From *Belarus. Vishe ozhidaniy* [*Belarus. Beyond expectations*] [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/pXEzIJ6Xm-E>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

Appendix B

Private Advertisements



Figure 26. Map of Belarus. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

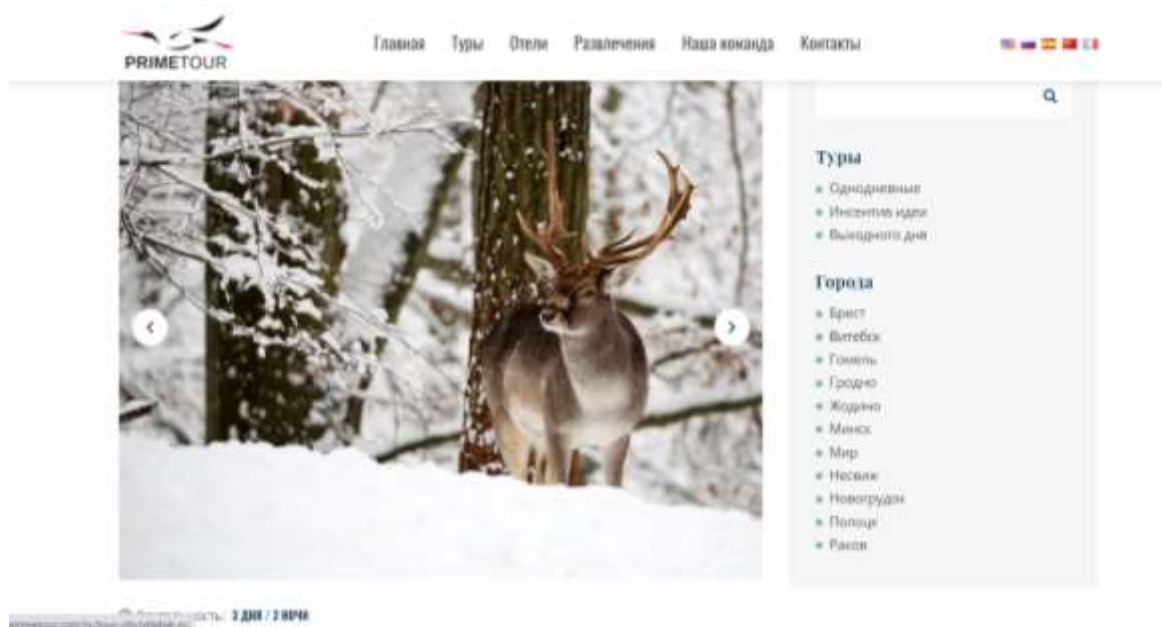


Figure 27. A deer. From *Belarus Travel Agency in Minsk*. <https://belarusprimetour.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 28. An elk. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 29. Raubichi winter sports centre. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 30. *Viva Braslav* festival. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 31. *Rok za Bobrov- “Belarusian Woodstock”*. From *Belarus Travel Agency in Minsk*. <https://belarusprimetour.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

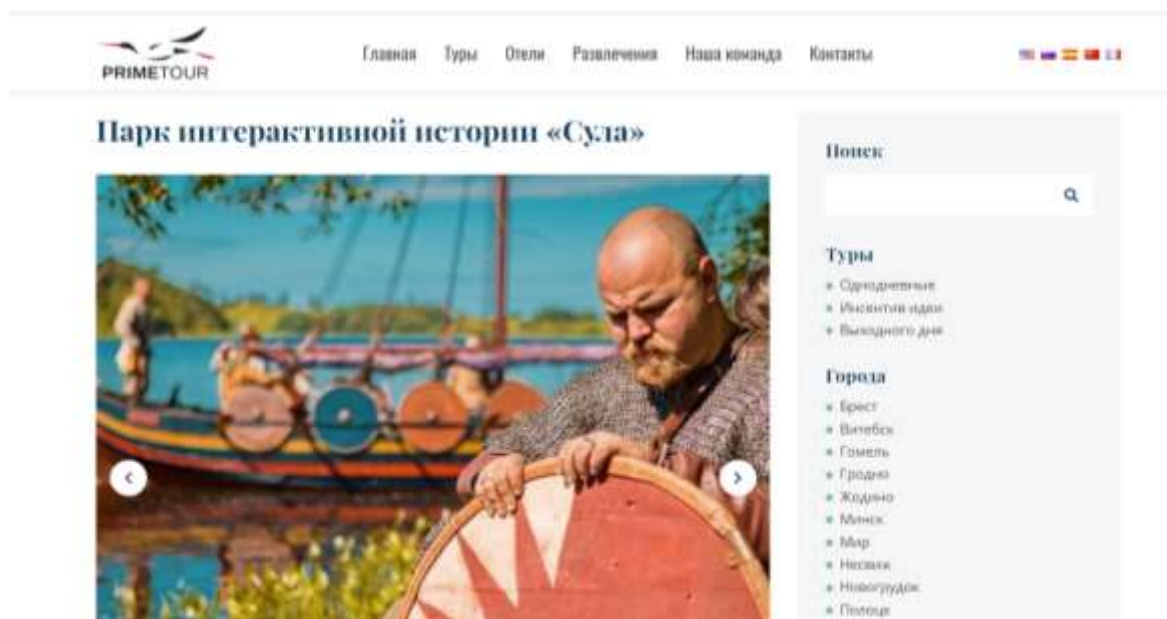


Figure 32. A man dressed like a Varangian. From *Belarus Travel Agency in Minsk*. <https://belarusprimetour.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 33. Elements of Varangian life in Belarus. From *Belarus Travel Agency in Minsk*. <https://belarusprimetour.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

Максим Мирный

Максим Мирный – самый известный теннисист Беларуси, который завоевал серию международных наград в парном разряде и вывел белорусскую сборную на лучшее место за всю ее историю на Кубке Дэвиса.



Figure 34. Max Mirnyi. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

Дарья Домрачева

Трёхкратная чемпионка Олимпийских игр в Сочи (2014) в гонке преследования, эстафетной гонке на 15 км, масс-старте (12,5 км), бронзовый призёр Олимпийских игр в Ванкувере (2010) в индивидуальной гонке на 15 км. По версии премии Valhalla Award белорусская спортсменка названа лучшей биатлонисткой 2010 года.



Figure 35. Darya Domracheva. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

Светлана Алексиевич

Белорусская писательница и журналист, автор книг "У войны не женское лицо", "Последние свидетели", "Цинковые мальчики", "Захаровы и смерти", "Чернобыльская молитва", "Последние свидетели. Сопло для детского голоса", "Время секонд хэнд". В 2015 году Светлана Алексиевич названа лауреатом Нобелевской премии по литературе: "за ее многоголосое творчество – повествование о страдании и мужестве в наше время".



Figure 36. Sviatlana Alexievich. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

Скарлетт Йоханссон

Она является американской актрисой, моделью и певицей. Йоханссон считается одним из секс-символов Голливуда, она часто появляется в опубликованных списках самых сексуальных женщин в мире. По состоянию на июль 2016 года, она является самой кассовой актрисой всех времен в Северной Америке, и десятой по всему миру. В 2016 она побила восемь фильмами кассовый рекорд, будучи самой кассовой актрисой года.



Figure 37. Scarlett Johansson. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

Харрисон Форд

Харрисон Форд – американский актер и кинорежиссер. Он получил всемирную известность за главные роли Хана Соло в фильмах "Star Wars" и в качестве главного героя серии фильмов про Индиану Джонса. В 1997 году Форд занял № 1 в списке журнала *Entire*: "Top 100 кинозвезд всех времен". По состоянию на 2016 год, фильмы Форда были одними из самых кассовых, что делает его самой кассовой звездой в США.



Figure 38. Harrison Ford. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 39. A young family in Belarus. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 40. The Great Patriotic War museum in Minsk. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

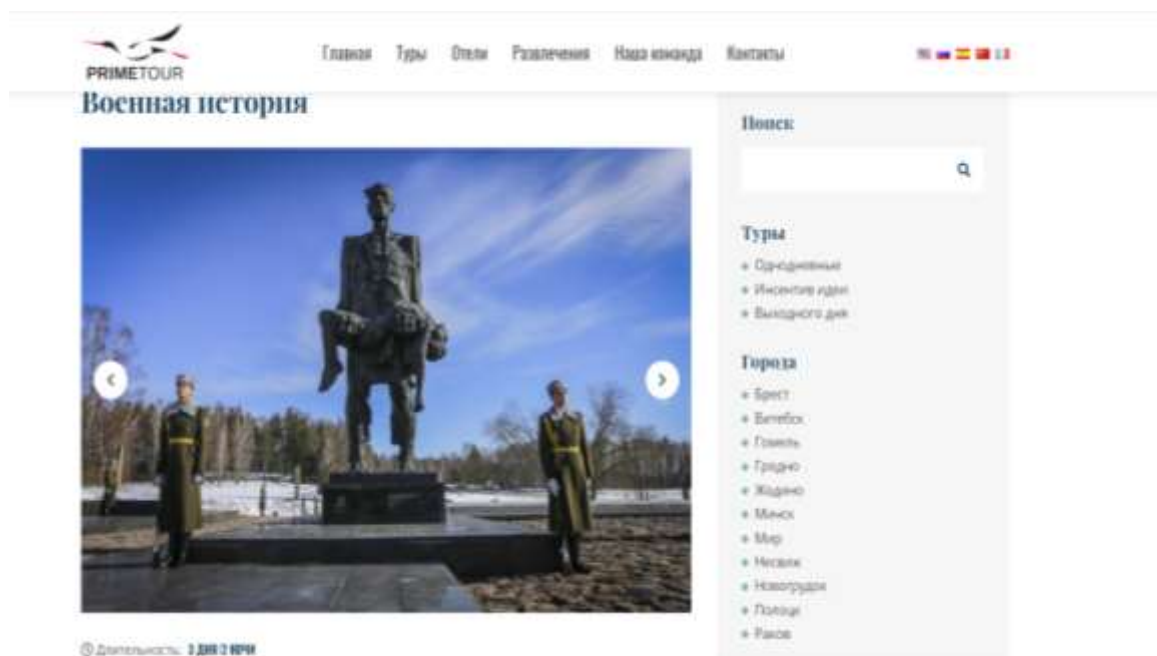


Figure 41. A monument in Khatyn village. From *Belarus Travel Agency in Minsk*. <https://belarusprimetour.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.



Figure 42. World of Tanks computer game. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

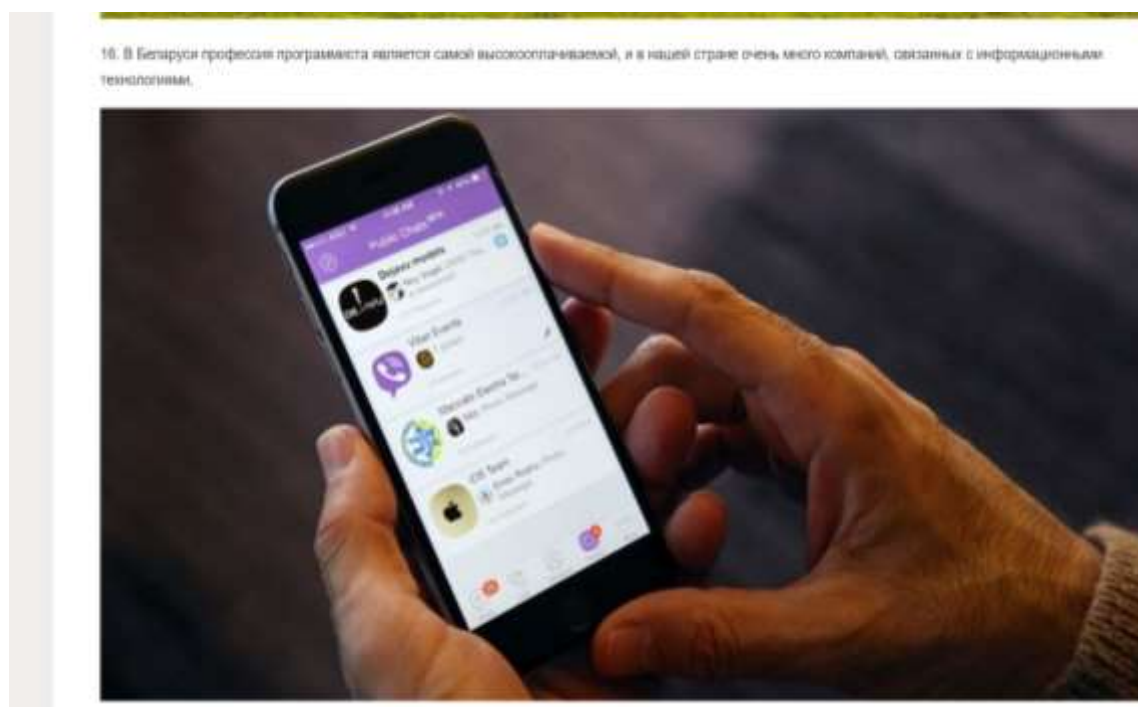


Figure 43. Viber, a popular messenger app in Belarus. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.

Парк высоких технологий

Основанный в 2005 году белорусский Парк высоких технологий стал одним из ведущих центров мира в сфере разработки программных продуктов и развития IT. Правовой режим ПВТ действует на всей территории Беларуси, и резиденты пользуются преимуществами независимо от расположения офиса. Компаниям из 50 стран мира является законченным белорусского Парка высоких технологий: более 85% производимого здесь ПО идет на экспорт – в США, Канаду, страны Европы, СНГ. Сегодня в ПВТ более 180 резидентов, среди которых европейские и мировые лидеры: EPAM Systems, разработчик MMO-игры "WOT" "Тейм Стрим" (центр разработки Wargaming), IBA IT Park, transition, Viber Media...



Figure 44. High Tech Park logo. From *Visit Belarus – Travel and Tourism in Belarus*. <https://yesbelarus.com/>. Accessed March 13, 2021. Screenshot by author.